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THIS ISSUE

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Avatar: The Last Airbender
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Death Jr. 2: Root of Evil
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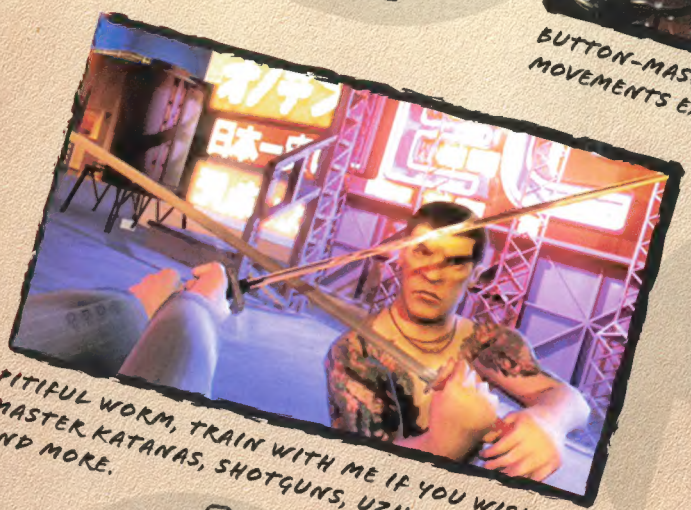

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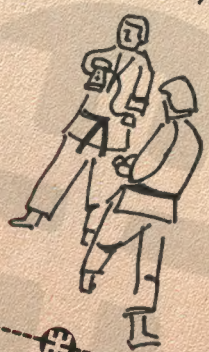

HEAD-TO-HEAD

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Art by: **LeSean Thomas**

Letter from the Editor

Settle the score

People often ask me why they see so many high scores in Play, to which there is a very simple answer. I've come at this thing from every angle over the past 16 years: From a tiny staff that reviews everything in one cramped office, to a massive staff—two actually—with everything siphoning through a managing editor, all of which brought me closer and closer to the best way to do this based on the finest input available: reader response. To a reader there's nothing worse than reading a review from somebody that obviously has no business reviewing a given genre, or worse yet, an editor who lacks the skills to properly play and therefore review a given game. But shouldn't all video game editors be qualified to review *any* game? Well, sure, but qualified and ideal are two different things. When you've got hundreds of games coming through the door you've got to pick and choose, and then assign games to editors by what genre they specialize in. A good example would be Death Jr. 2 in this very issue which I personally deem a 9.5. Near perfection? One might ask, but to me it is. As the platformer guy (I just love 'em) rating it as a PSP action-platformer, it's a 9.5 all day. It's not going up against, say, Okami, because they are different games on different consoles. I rate games according to who they're targeted for and the platform they are on. Why do it any other way? That's who the developer is making it for. On the other hand, Brady, who loves FPSs, might give Prey an 8.5, where I'd give it a 7. Obviously I'm not the go-to guy for first-person shooters. I like a few, like Condemned, but with so many games pouring in I find it far more beneficial to both the reader and the developer to assign games to editors who represent the people most apt to be in the market for them. Also, Play isn't a corporate magazine. We pick and choose what we cover each month, and toss anything we don't feel is conducive to the issue onto the out pile. That's how we let the games you need to read about breathe. We're not a buyer's guide. We're here to serve discerning gamers. A swarm of editors blasting through games with other editors looking over their shoulder is not a good environment to comment on someone's 10-million-dollar product. We play by our lonesome and use the plush Play offices for meetings and business. So in conclusion, our reviews are higher because we have specialists digging deep into games they choose to review. That said, we throw up more than our fair share of 5s, 6s, and 7s. We don't *only* review games we know will be good but we do avoid games we know the majority of our readership has no interest in. Doing so frees us up to do right by not only you, the reader (our employer) but gaming itself. This is a huge responsibility and an honor, and we treat it as such.

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

play magazine staff

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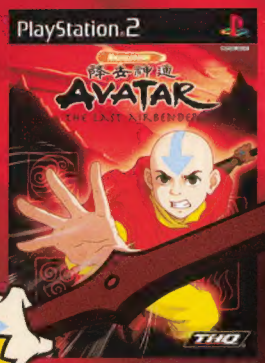

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* PLAY Magazine, October 2006

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JOB CLASSES

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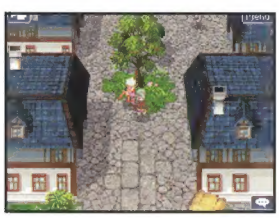

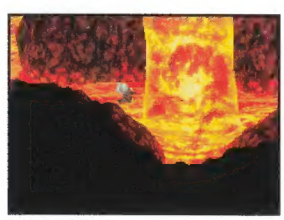

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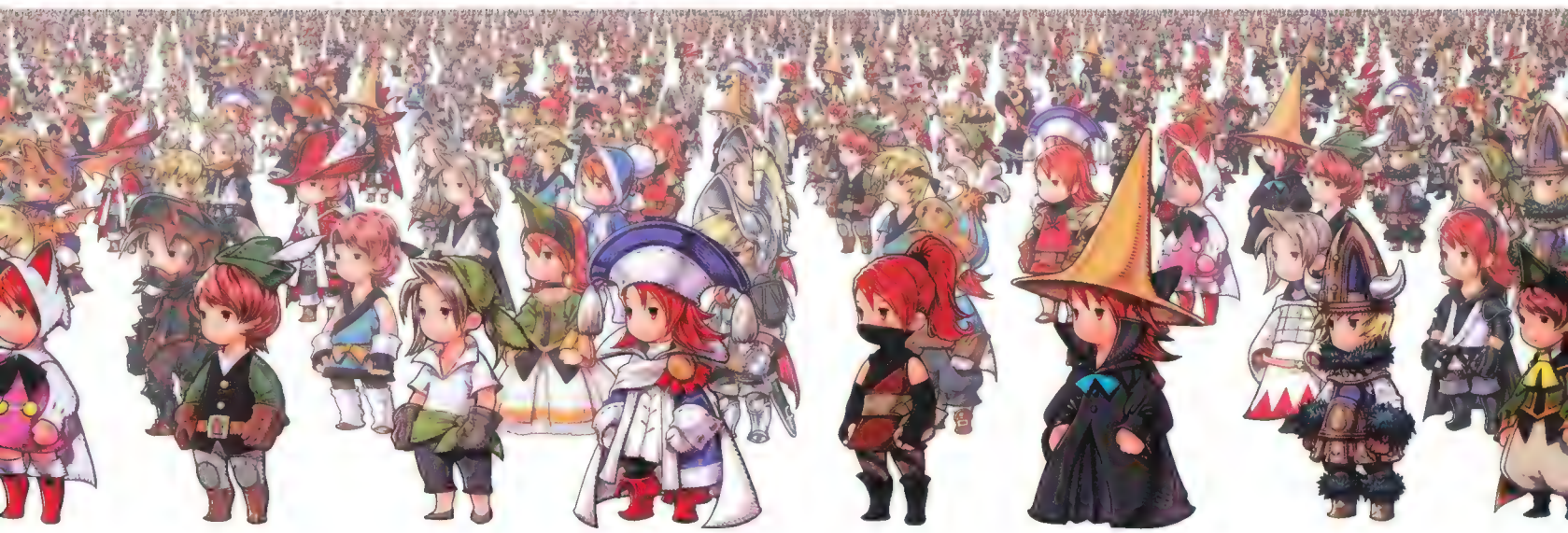

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Cover 2
Crackdown
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playback

November 2006

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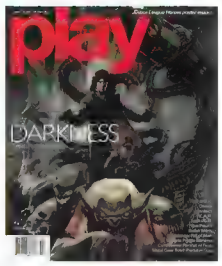

LETTER OF THE MONTH

New Dog Old Tricks?

Concerning the Nintendo Wii, I applaud Nintendo for the idea of including the online back catalogue of retro gaming. It is just too little too late. This would have been great if it was 5 years ago and Nintendo was on the brink of launching the Gamecube. Google any emulation forum and anyone will tell you that people have been playing our old favorites for years and in high res to boot. The problem is, that people like me who love these old school games probably already have them. Either they have the original game on the original console or with a PC, Dreamcast, or modded Xbox and the hundreds of emulators available on the internet.

So basically Nintendo is offering something that is already free. According to the emulation laws if I have the original copy of Streets of Rage 2 on Genesis, I am allowed to own the rom and play it on my Dreamcast, Xbox, or PC. So is Nintendo going to make me pay for a game I already own or will they have some sort of serial number input to get it for free? And what about all the compilations that have been out these past 2 years. You can get all the arcade perfect ports of Street Fighter 2 turbo and Mortal Kombats. And um....who really needs another way to play Sonic the Hedgehog? Ooh, I can get it on my cell phone! Yeah, stop the presses!

Joe Parker
Gamertag: Knuckle2k

The horror

After listening to Higurashi No Naku Koro Ni (I ain't even a horror fan and this disturbing series is now my favorite anime!) I was wondering if you could incorporate some presentation of Japan-only-anime-with-few-chances-to-get-release-over-here in your anime section (Like the one mentioned in the beginning). I think It might be a good idea to make people aware of some great series so maybe they'll one day come out here. Anyway, even if you don't do it, it won't keep you from being the best north-American mag, thanks for your amazing interview (The Darkness' one was really great) and your accurate review (I never saw in all my life a mag who got so close to what I thought about certain game). Keep up the good work!
EC

The 868 Gamer March!

All Gamer Alert!
I'm trying to get the word out! TGS '06 announced a PlayStation 2 version of Chain of Memories. Since then alot of Kingdom Hearts fans want COM to come to the U.S.A and have created a Kingdom Hearts COM online Petition. I recently signed the petition myself. The goal of the petition is to have COM released in the U.S.A. I believe the current number of signatures is 868 (this number I hope will rise!).

We are **NOT** requesting for the Japanese Kingdom Hearts 2: Final Mix to come to the U.S BUT to have only Chain of Memories.
For more info on the petition and other ways of helping visit:
http://www.khinsider.com/news2/headlines/161168046.shtml
if the above URL is too difficult please visit: http://www.khinsider.com *and look under "KH2:FM + Re: CoM Petition/Contact Campaign" posted on 09/25/2006*
Here is a copy of the petition:

To: Square-Enix
We are a group of fans for the Kingdom Hearts franchise, by Square-Enix. On September 13th, 2006, we discovered that there was to be a Kingdom Hearts II: Final Mix, and, more importantly, bundled with it, a remake of the Gameboy Advance filler game, Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories.

Many of us are concerned that this game will not be localized and translated for international fans' benefits.

Kingdom Hearts I: Final Mix was never translated or localized, and we fully understand that the Final Mix version was made to give the Japanese players content that the international players were given - the bonus battle with Sephiroth, for example. With Kingdom Hearts II: Final Mix sometime in the future, we are all doubting whether the vast majority of us will be able to play or not. Many of us are not able to modify our consoles, or import games.

Because of this, we are concerned that we may be missing out. The Kingdom Hearts series has gained an innumerable amount of fans since the arrival of Kingdom Hearts II, and many of us would love to be able to buy it and enjoy it.

While we understand the Final Mix versions are intended to be bonus incentives for Japanese players, we feel, that there is a sufficient market to warrant localization. We understand, too, that a great deal of effort goes into recording voices for games, and should this be too much of a demand, we will gladly accept a subtitled game.

We hope that Square-Enix will consider translating and localizing the Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories remake.

We wish you good luck on your future endeavors. Thank you for many, many hours of fun.
Sincerely,
The Unsigned

Also We hope that PSP fans will also sign up, this is a HUGE Opportunity for those with PS2's and also only own the PSP to play Chain of Memories.

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Wii Are One

Nintendo debuts new console in three separate worldwide events

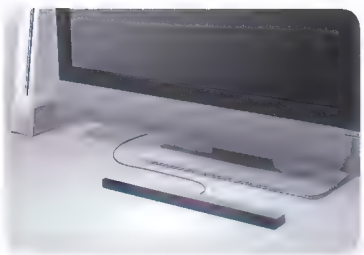
On a muggy, rainy morning in New York City, Nintendo of America's president Reggie Fils-Amis took aim at his competitors Sony and Microsoft, and fired.

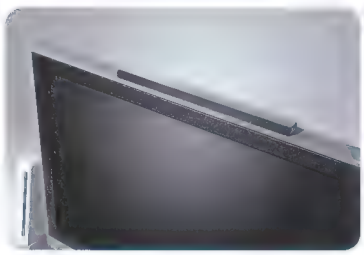
"MSRP: $249. One price, one configuration, one color: white."

Fils-Amis and Nintendo had come to New York's Chelsea Piers to unveil the Wii game console. To do the job properly, Nintendo held three separate events worldwide in the span of roughly 48 hours; the New York unveiling had been preceded by an event in Tokyo, and was followed by a gathering in London.

Although anticipation was high, the news that initially filtered out from Nintendo's New York press conference came as a surprise to no one. The New York Times had leaked information about the console's specifics on its Web site hours before the event: The Wii would launch on November 19 in the United States, a full 13 days before the console's December 2 debut in Japan. The console would clock in at $249 and come packaged with one Wii remote and one nunchuk controller, as well as the five-game compilation Wii Sports.

More than 30 Wii titles will see release by year's end, Fils-Amis said, with about 15 or so appearing on November 19. In addition to first-party releases such as The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess, Battalion Wars II, Super Mario Galaxy, Big Brain Academy, Metroid Prime 3: Corruption, and Wario Ware: Smooth Moves, Nintendo also touted releases from third-party developers Activision, Atari, Atlus, Electronic Arts, Konami, Majesco, Midway, Sega, THQ, Ubisoft, and Vivendi Universal. At the event, third-party Wii titles such as Activision's Marvel: Ultimate Alliance and Tony Hawk's Downhill Jam, Atlus' Trauma Center: Second Opinion, Konami's Elebits, Electronic Arts' Madden NFL 2007, and Ubisoft's Rayman Raving Rabbids and Red Steel were playable, and prominently displayed alongside the Nintendo-made games.





You will have to find a spot for the sensor bar, but Nintendo has made it as unobtrusive as technically possible

"It's a great system, with a great game library," Fils-Amis said. "But you knew I'd say that."

Fils-Amis said, "Our strategy is based on one core belief: That the next step in gaming is bringing gaming back to the masses. It is literally that simple; appealing to current gamers as well as broadening that industry to new gamers, people who today don't even consider themselves in the gaming industry."

"Our mantra is, satisfy current players in new ways. Re-engage former players. Most importantly, grow the market to new players," he said.

At the conference, Nintendo chose not to emphasize the Wii's specifications, but rather the console's unique two-handed, lightgun-style control scheme, and what the Wii could do in terms of attracting an audience. To this end, the company announced the creation of Wii channels, a series of options people can access through the game console.

Fils-Amis called these Wii channels a pied piper of sorts. "We believe it can alter the relationship between everyone in the household and their TV screen. It's not just virtual console, but a total effort to redefine who will use video games in the future," he said.

"Our challenge was to find a universal appeal for Wii," he told the 200 or so journalists who were in attendance for the event. Wii channels can be accessed when the Wii is connected to a television and left in standby mode. Twelve channels will be available initially, but this number can and will grow as time goes on.

"Our strategy is based on one core belief: That the next step in gaming is bringing gaming back to the masses."
Reggie Fils-Amis

The disc channel allows players to play both Wii and GameCube titles. Another channel lets players create their own tiny virtual humans called Miis. Miis can be customized, stored within a Wii remote, and taken to a friend's house. Individual characters created in the Mii channel can also be used within gameplay in titles such as Wario Ware: Smooth Moves and Wii Sports. A photo channel lets players access, share, and manipulate photos; the console has a built-in slot that accepts SD memory cards from digital cameras. With an Internet connection, Wii users can access both news and weather channels that will be updated constantly. A separate Internet channel gives Wii users access to the information superhighway via the Web browser Opera. Messages and photos can be sent via a special message channel, and Nintendo promises players will be able to access game-specific news such as updates for existing titles or release dates for new ones.

Downloadable content such as classic video games from the Sega Genesis, Turbo Grafx 16, Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES), and the Nintendo 64 can be purchased via special "Wii points" on the Wii shop channel. Users will also be able to purchase Wii points at retail, as well as on the shop channel, at an exchange rate of $1 for 100 points.

As it stands now, downloaded NES titles will cost 500 points, SNES offerings 800 points, and Nintendo 64 games 1,000 points ($5, $8, $10, respectively). Downloaded titles will appear as separate channels, and are stored within the Wii's internal memory. Three of these "virtual console" titles will be available at launch, Fils-Amis said: Super Mario 64, the NES' The Legend of Zelda, and Super Mario World for the SNES. He also promised 30 virtual console titles by year's end and, starting in January, 10 classic games a month until the end of the year.

In addition, Fils-Amis said Wii users will be able to access Nintendo's Wi-Fi connection gaming service via their consoles, and the Wii will be able to communicate wirelessly to the Internet, even when its power is shut off—the company calls this mode WiiConnect24. No mention was made of when titles featuring online competitive or cooperative play would be released, but Fils-Amis suggested such games, notably Battalion Wars II and Pokémon Battle Revolution are certainly forthcoming.

In response to Sony's manufacturing problems with the PlayStation 3 and its recent decision to delay the console's launch in Europe, Fils-Amis promised four million Wii consoles would be shipped in the 43 days between November 19 and December 31, with the bulk of that number going to the North American market.

The Wii, at a Glance

Wii Nintendo's upcoming home video game console. According to a Nintendo-released style guide, "It is simply Wii, not Nintendo Wii. It is pronounced 'we,' indicating its all-inclusive nature. The name works best at the beginning of declarative statements."

Cost $249, U.S dollars

Controls A Wii remote controller, which resembles a television remote control and a nunchuk device comprise Wii's control scheme. Up to four Wii remote controllers can be connected at once using wireless Bluetooth technology. The wireless signal can be detected within 10 meters of the console. Both the Wii remote and nunchuk controllers include a three-axis motion sensor. The Wii remote controller also includes a speaker, rumble feature and expansion port, and can be used as a pointer within five meters of the screen. The Wii remote controller has a power switch, plus pad, and six gameplay and function buttons: A, B, Minus, Home, 1, and 2. The nunchuk controller includes an analog control stick and C and Z gameplay buttons.

Discs The Wii accepts and plays both 12-centimeter optical Wii discs and 8-centimeter GameCube discs.

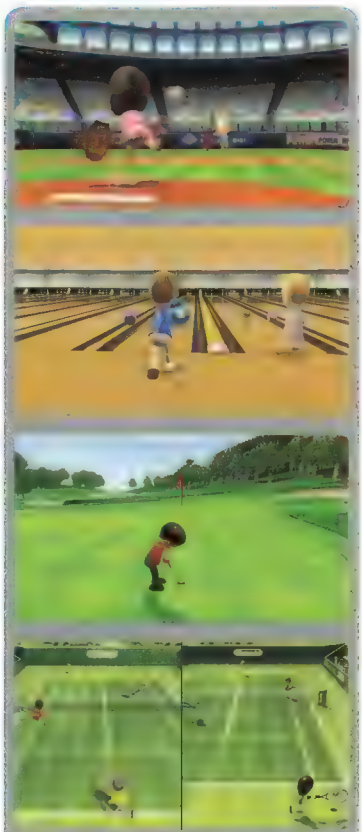
Specifications and other features The Wii console has 512 megabytes of internal flash memory, two USB 2.0 ports, and built-in Wi-Fi capability. A bay for an SD memory card lets players expand the internal flash memory. Design was optimized with state-of-the-art processing technologies that minimize power consumption, keep the console compact, and enable the "sleepless" WiiConnect24 mode.

In addition, the Wii has four ports for classic Nintendo GameCube controllers; two slots for Nintendo GameCube Memory Cards; and an AV multi-output port for component, composite or S-video.

First Party Games

Wii

The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess
Nintendo



Wii Sports (bundled)

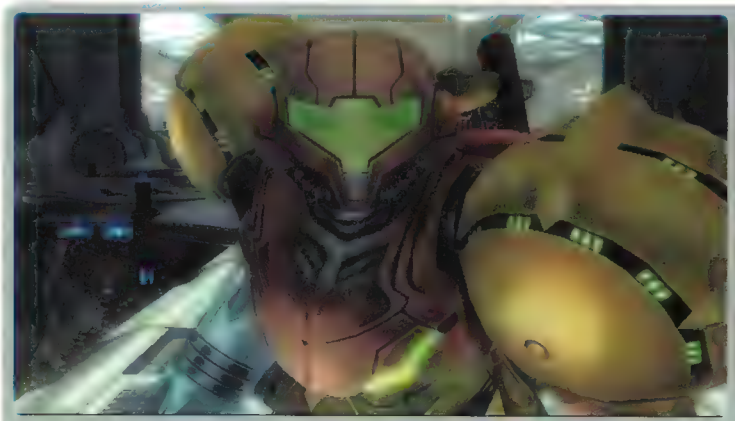
Super Mario Galaxy
Nintendo

continued...

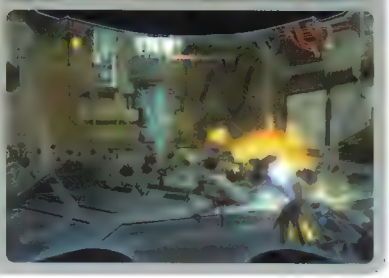
Wii, Hands-on

First Party Games (cont.)

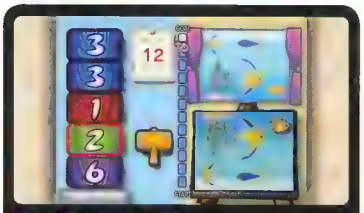
Wii



Metroid Prime 3 Corruption



Battalion Wars 2



Big Brain Academy
Nintendo

Mario Strikers Charged

WarioWare Smooth Moves

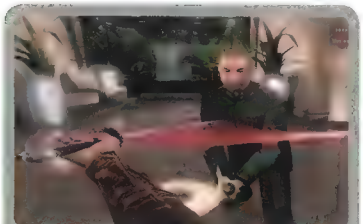
Excite Truck

Third Party Games

Wii

Dragonball Z

Chicken Little Ace in Action



Red Steel

continued...

Third Party Games (cont.)

Wii

Rayman Raving Rabbids
Ubisoft

Ebbts
Konami

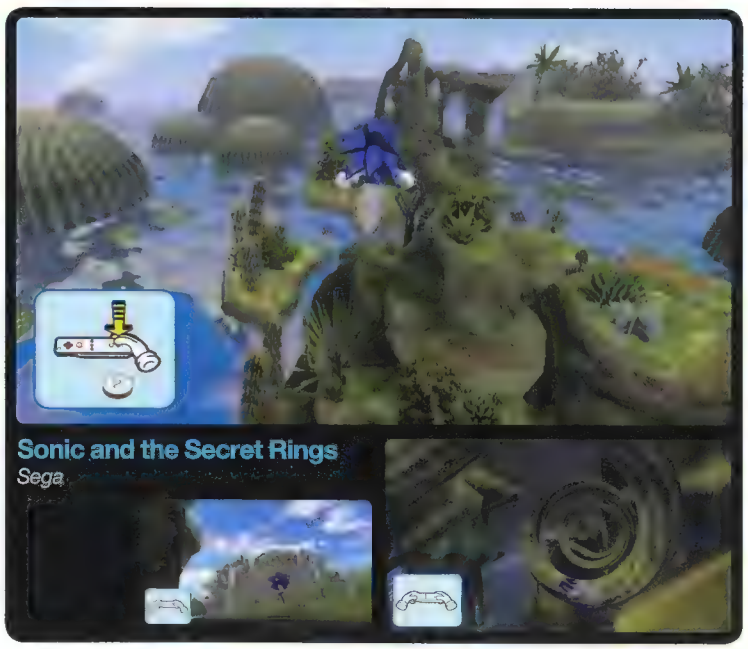
Madden NFL 07
Electronic Arts

Marvel Ultimate Alliance
Activision

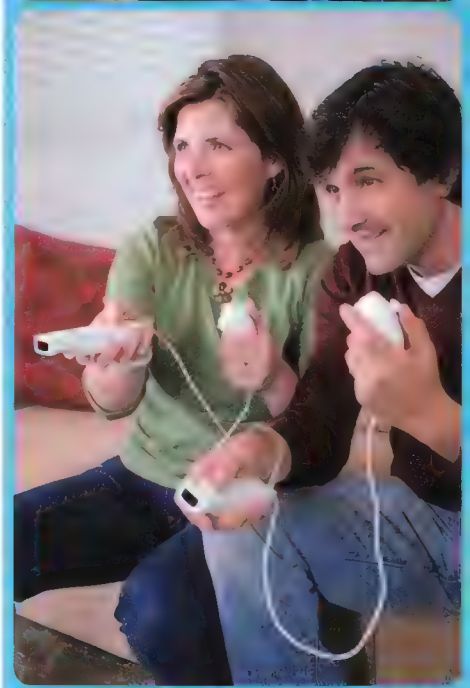
Super Monkey Ball BB
Sega

Tony Hawk's Downhill Jam
Activision

Trauma Center Second Opinion
Atlus



Sonic and the Secret Rings
Sega



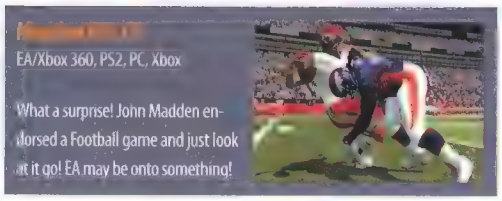
www.TheDarknessIsSpreading.com

Database

November 2006

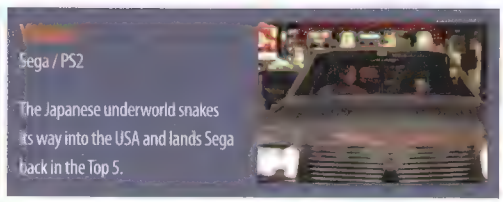
Square Enix/PS2

Despite mixed reviews Dirge of Cerberus made its Top 10 debut.



EA/Xbox 360, PS2, PC, Xbox

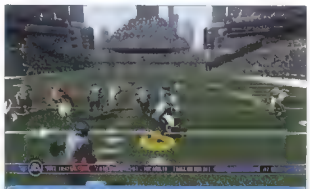
What a surprise! John Madden endorsed a Football game and just look at it go! EA may be onto something!



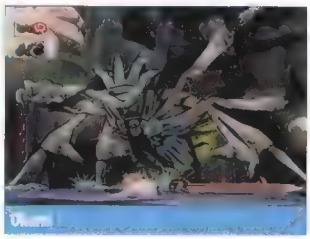
Sega / PS2

The Japanese underworld snakes its way into the USA and lands Sega back in the Top 5.

	NPD Group Top Ten: July Game Sales
01	**Madden NFL 07** EA / PS2
02	**Madden NFL 07** EA / Xbox 360
03	**Dead Rising** Capcom / Xbox 360
04	**Madden NFL 07** EA / Xbox
05	**Final Fantasy VII: Dirge of Cerberus** Square Enix / PS2
06	**New Super Mario Bros.** Nintendo / NDS
07	**NCAA Football 07** EA / Xbox
08	**Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories** Rockstar / PS2
09	**Brain Age: Train Your Brain In Minutes** Nintendo / NDS
10	**Ninety-Nine Nights** Microsoft / Xbox 360



	Editors' Top 5
01	**Okami** Capcom / PS2
02	**Yakuza** Sega / PS2
03	**Ultimate Ghosts 'n' Goblins** Capcom / PSP
04	**Dead Rising** Capcom / Xbox 360
05	**Saints Row** THQ / Xbox 360

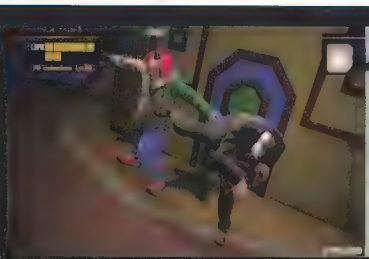


	Readers' Most Wanted
01	**FF XII** Square Enix / PS2
02	**Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess** Nintendo GC/Wii
03	**Metal Gear Solid 4** Konami/PS3
04	**Halo 3** Microsoft/Xbox 360
05	**Fable 2** Microsoft/Xbox 360

play magazine Editor Top 5/Now Playing

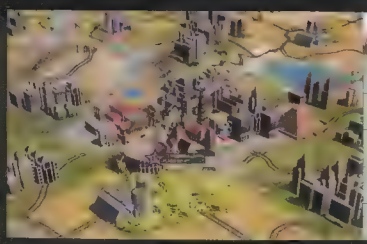
Dave Halverson

01	**Death Jr. 2: Root of Evil** Konami / PSP
02	**Ninety-Nine Nights** Microsoft / Xbox 360
03	**Lunar Knights** Konami / NDS
04	**Enchanted Arms** Ubisoft / Xbox 360
05	**Ultimate Ghosts 'n' Goblins** Capcom / PSP



Brady Fiechter

01	**Dead Rising** Capcom / Xbox 360
02	**Yakuza** Sega / PS2
03	**Lost Planet** Capcom / Xbox 360
04	**Mario Hoops 3-on-3** Nintendo / NDS
05	**Mario Vs Donkey Kong 2** Nintendo / NDS

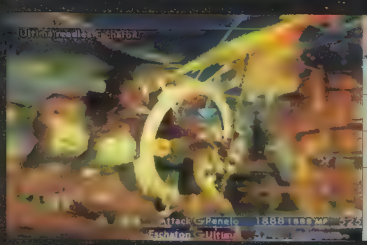


Greg Orlando

01	**Civilization IV** 2K Games / Macintosh
02	**Lego Star Wars II: TOT** LucasArts / Xbox 360
03	**Mario Hoops 3-on-3** Nintendo / NDS
04	**Final Fantasy XII** Square Enix / PS2
05	**WTF: Work Time Fun** D3Publisher / PSP

Casey Loe

01	**Tales of the Abyss** Bandai Namco Games / PS2
02	**Final Fantasy III** Square Enix / NDS
03	**Dead Rising** Capcom / Xbox 360
04	**Final Fantasy XII** Square Enix / PS2
05	**Phantasy Star Universe** Sega / PS2



Heather Campbell

01	**Final Fantasy XII** Square Enix / PS2
02	**Final Fantasy VIII** SquareSoft / PS
03	**Final Fantasy VI** SquareSoft / SNES
04	**Final Fantasy VII** SquareSoft / PS
05	**Final Fantasy XI** Square Enix / PS2

Nick DesBarres

01	**Fresh-Picked Tinkles...** Nintendo / NDS
02	**Eiyu Densetsu: Sora no Kiseki** FC Falcom / PSP
03	**Dead Rising** Capcom / Xbox 360
04	**Final Fantasy XI: TAU** Square Enix / Xbox 360
05	**Surging Aura** Sega / Mega Drive

Eric Patterson

01	**Rhythm Tengoku** Nintendo / GBA
02	**Tomb Raider Legend** Eidos / Xbox 360
03	**Summon Night: SS2** Atlus / GBA
04	**Tokobot Plus** Tecmo / PS2
05	**Skipping Stone** Gamevil / Mobile

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Dirt God Commandments

Thou shall race all offroading vehicles:
ATVs, bikes, buggies and trophy trucks.

Thou shall do sick freestyle tricks off jumps.

Thou shall not mud pants while getting big air.

Thou shall customize vehicle to make faster.

Thou shall race in all terrain: snow, dirt, sand,
forest and especially mud.

Thou shall not wash ATV unless thou washes it with mud.

Thou shall strive to become a pro racer.

Thou shall feed on adrenaline for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

**Thou shall honor all commandments
of the Dirt Gods or feel their wrath.**

ATV Offroad Fury 4. Now race with MX bikes, buggies and trophy trucks on over 70 new tracks. Live the life of a rookie rider in Story Mode, and customize your own tracks with Track Editor. The Dirt Gods are pleased.

EVERYONE
E
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Mild Lyrics
Mild Violence

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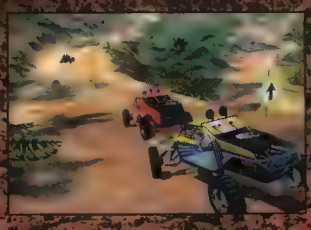
ATV Offroad Fury 4

BLAZE YOUR OWN TRAIL



online

PlayStation 2

LIVE IN YOUR WORLD.
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Give piñatas a better place to go! Custom build your very own piñata world and juggle the relationships of over 60 species of piñatas including the SOURS, who might need a good whacking if you catch them causing trouble. An unruly world is no world for piñatas. Wouldn't you agree? vivapinata.com

Viva Piñata! Don't beat 'em, join 'em!

Viva Piñata

Coming on Xbox 360

XBOX 360

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Microsoft
Developer	Real Time Worlds	Available	February

CRACKDOWN

GOING UP!

WORDS DAVE HALVERSON

Looks like Mel's on the sauce again.

The world's gone to hell in a hand-basket and stands at the threshold of global anarchy. In order to combat the rampant criminal activity, the world's crime fighting organizations have rallied together to form one united force to combat the threat, known as The Agency. This is their last stand.

The last bastion of order lies in a stronghold called the Keep, located on an island in the center of the world capital, Pacific City, surrounded by three occupied regions divided between three lethal gangs: Los Muertos, The Volk, and Shai Gen. If the Keep falls the world is lost. But normal peacekeepers don't stand a chance keeping the gangs at bay, so The Agency has no choice but to resort to desperate measures, engaging the services of a disgraced scientist and his perverse research to develop superhuman soldiers: human prototypes that become stronger as they search and destroy that can be easily cloned if eliminated. Welcome to the party, pal.

Dropped into the meat grinder—you get a car, a gun, and a boot into the war zone—with all the subtlety of an ice-skating elephant, Crackdown wastes no time reminding the player that shit's bad and you're in it. Not only is the first stronghold teeming with militia, but the street traffic can be just as deadly as traveling on foot. The Los Muertos are everywhere…including the rooftops. It's one thing getting peppered from street level but when you've got gunners on theatre marquees, rooftops, and balconies raining down grenades it's best to just keep motoring. And that's initially the beauty of Crackdown. There are no colored circles to stand in, no set structure to adhere to. The entire island chain—all three massive regions—are open from the onset as are the 21 crime lords; if you can get to them. The hitch is that your abilities are far from sufficient to handle the streets, let alone infiltrate a compound and kill a kingpin. So, Pacific City becomes a place for you to cut your teeth, developing your agility, strength, firearms, driving and explosives expertise—and RTW have hand-packed the place with gameplay. There are nodes located throughout each city that link you to The Agency's intelligence and weapons cache (once you liberate them) but otherwise you're on your own. Peacekeeper divisions are working throughout the city but it's up to you to take out each gang's hierarchy one linchpin at a time.

It's a refreshing amalgam, heaps more action oriented than any previous open-world game, offering up the big city allure of GTA, the nuanced shooting of an over-the-shoulder action/shooter, and

"Dropped into the meat grinder—you get a car, a gun, and a boot into the war zone."

the jump, shimmy and hanging elements of a platformer. It's hard to fathom how all of this can exist in a game of this magnitude without sacrificing elsewhere, but depending on how you look at it, RTW pull it off. Not only is the entire world open but the look is refreshingly original (makes me pine for a Jet Set sequel all the more). Pedestrian models look great given their numbers, reflective surfaces abound, the textures are rich, character movement is extremely fluid and water not only reflects the sky but you can swim anytime, anywhere. Your agent feels like an action/adventure lead plugged into the normally rigid open-world format. On the flip side, there are no two-wheeled vehicles, no satirical radio stations, and things aren't as cinematic as in GTA or Saint's Row so perhaps that is the trade off.

One thing is for sure; the world outside of the Keep has gone mad, and for some reason everyone in the city has decided to go on a walk. Although Crackdown isn't your token "urban" sprawl, opting instead for a pseudo-futuristic universe with urban undertones, violence levels careen well over the top. Blood squirts and gushes from your victims, whom you can kick or shoot while they're down and then once they're a corpse pick up to hurl off of roofs, into traffic…whatever. And that's only the beginning. As you become stronger you'll be tossing massive gates and soon cars with ease. The shooting in Crackdown also boasts a few firsts for the genre: Confronted with multiple (often charging) assailants, you can free target or lock on and go for the leg, arm, chest or head. You can always go in for the good-ol'-up-close-and-personal quick kill too if you're holding a shotgun, but while fun and easy (especially with regenerating body armor) be warned: these gangs have massive grenade and rocket stockpiles and will not hesitate to bounce you around like a tennis ball. The AI in Crackdown is set on annihilate. Cars and other vehicles can be targeted in the same way. Once locked on you can toggle between the gas tank, driver, etc., depending on the situation.

Crackdown's most compelling feature however, comes by way of the vertical platforming elements. Fans who enjoy the nomadic and explorative aspects of open-world gaming will find out fast what puts the crack in Crackdown. Stairs, fire escapes, awnings and so forth beg to be climbed to pinch the gleaming green agility orbs they conceal, which ultimately make doing so all the richer. Like a mammoth jungle gym, the skyline becomes more and more accessible as your leaping abilities mount, creating an evolving platformer within an open-world framework with epic results. You'll go from using your SUV as a makeshift platform to grapple a 20-foot ledge to flying hundreds of feet through the air with ease. Sounds like The Incredible Hulk? Er, no. Crackdown is far more limber—more like a Tomb Raider on steroids. No matter what you're doing; shooting, driving, or platforming, it all goes to your character's evolution. All that exploration and extracurricular activity pays dividends in Crackdown, slowly revealing the inner hulking-yet-limber killing machine that dwells within.

It seems a wise move on Microsoft's part to delay Crackdown until after the holidays. Anything worth doing (especially of this magnitude) is worth doing right; plus, they avoid the risk of being swept away in the holiday glut, not to mention providing us with more fodder to ring in a very happy new year with our Xbox 360s. With Gears of War, Blue Dragon, Mass Effect, Too Human and Crackdown all slated for the next few months, how could it be anything but?

"Your agent feels like an action/adventure lead plugged into the normally rigid open-world format."

David Jones

David Jones may not be a name you know even though the first studio he founded, DMA Design Ltd. (now Rockstar North) brought us the world's most controversial and best-selling video game series with Grand Theft Auto III. Having written and designed over 15 games including Lemmings, Lemmings 2&3, Body Harvest and Wild Metal Country, David has recently turned his attention to his new studio Real Time Worlds and finishing what DMA started, pioneering once again by going where no open-world game has gone before...up.

Interview

Personal foul
Roughing the pusher.

play: Your former co. DMA is greatly responsible for this whole movement having ushered in an entirely new genre with GTA III. Why do you think it has taken this long to plug vertical play/ platforming mechanics into the mix? Is it a hardware thing or just that these games are so daunting to create in the first place?
David: Certainly, to a large degree, "Crackdown" benefits from the incredible horsepower of the Xbox 360. We've been able to create an immense, stylized world for the gamer to play in without having to make a lot of the compromises that early open-world games were forced to make. That said, we had yet to see a sandbox title with a three-dimensional world actually think in three dimensions. The universe doesn't just operate on ground level, you know? Kingpins live in the penthouses, as well. And we found that there are limitless possibilities for mayhem and destruction once you introduce a fully vertical world – whether it's raining down destruction from on-high or racing across-town from rooftop-to-rooftop.

Speaking of "they" which moniker do you prefer, "open-world" or "sandbox"? Sandbox sounds like toddlers might have a go don't you think?
In the end, they're really all words for the same thing. "Open-world" is a great term because that's just what we've created – an open world where gamers are free to run and jump and shoot and destroy as they please. And maybe "sandbox" sounds somewhat childish, but it also implies a sense of freedom for the gamer to experience that childish sensation of wonder combined with a tongue-in-cheek adult sense of mayhem.

I know that the key innovation here is the platforming but before we get to that I'm curious about the state of Pacific City and for that matter the rest of the world as Crackdown gets underway. Unlike GTA or more recently Saints Row, the player's introduction to the world is a brutal one. There's no tooling around, sight seeing. At least in the pre-Beta, the immediate vicinity is in utter chaos. Is this meant to convey the message of true anarchy rather than some controlled game environment?
Quite simply, the city is overridden. Gangs have seized control of Pacific City and the police have proven incapable of holding them back. The Agency – and consequently you – are the city's last hope. And if we can all simply admit that we're here to have fun, - to fire a few cool weapons, blow some things up and jump around from building-to-building - then there's no reason that the player shouldn't be thrown into the mix from minute-one.

Once the player crosses the threshold into a boss compound a dossier appears along with the probability for success. Does the player character evolve in league with a certain order of boss kills or is the structure somewhat like an RPG where it's essential that the player level-up? In other words, is there the option to mow through the story or will you simply find yourself outgunned unless you truly bask in the game?
Your Agent will level-up in each of the game's five abilities - strength, agility, firearms, explosives and driving – as he utilizes each one. So the more gunplay or heavy lifting you exercise throughout the game, the more of a muscle-bound marksman your character will become. Gamers should have every opportunity to master each of these skills and become a true level-five agent anywhere in the game world and at any time. You're not going to be tossing around cars from the very beginning. However, a truly exceptional player might be able to make it through the entire game, defeating each of the 21 kingpins, at a very low level. Killing bosses is not a requisite to leveling up. Some bosses are, of course, more protected and certainly more difficult than others, but with

"...we had yet to see a sandbox title with a three-dimensional world actually think in three dimensions."
David Jones

the world being as open and destructible as it is, an intelligent, low-level player can always think of ways to use the world to their advantage.

As the game forges on will the player experience the interior of The Keep (maybe meet the good professor) or are we limited to the garage area?
The heart of the Agency building – or the garage area – is really your main base of operations. And while you might not be able to walk the halls of the Agency, a very agile Agent might be able to climb to – and indeed, jump off of – the very top of the building. Roughly the height of the Empire State Building. (And I'll give you a hint: there's an Achievement to be had there!)

Is skill evolution achieved strictly by completing achievements and collecting orbs or is the players every move dumped into the equation?
Kill an enemy with a machine gun – get a firearms point. Take out a group of enemies with a grenade – get a few explosives points. The more you jump, the higher and farther your next jump will be. Improvement through use. The game does, however, stat-track many of the player's movements and activities, allowing for exciting opportunities to top yourself and your friends and possibly gain a few cool Achievements.

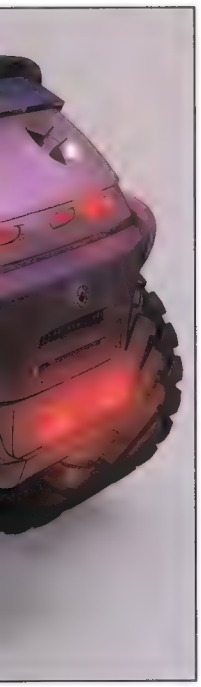
Aside from the presentation of the dossiers, are there also in-game or CG cut scenes? And if so do they push the envelope in any way?
As much as possible, we want the action to progress directly in-game, keeping cut-scenes to a minimum. The dossiers are great fun in that they introduce you to several truly ruthless characters, but the greater fun is in tracking them down and killing them off. The heart-and-soul of any open-world game is how fun it is to play. Gamers simply want to get out there into the world and wreak some havoc, not trudge through cut-scene after cut-scene only to be tasked with delivering some random item across town. In "Crackdown," you're tasked with saving the city, pure and simple, and killing each of the 21 kingpins that hold it hostage. How you do that, and in what order, is entirely up to you.

Of the Seven bosses I discovered, there were no females. Do they get into the act? Does the game have a key female character on either side?
Violence and corruption are certainly not sexist in "Crackdown." Players can expect to bring a few of the city's more villainous vixens to justice, one way or another.

Our preview build featured a nice array of musical selections while driving but none of the cheeky radio stations made famous in GTA III. Is this due to the state of the build or the state of anarchy?
Really, it's about streamlining the experience. "Crackdown" is about Hollywood-style action, not satirical radio programming. So to the extent that we've been able to provide players with a great soundtrack by which to deliver destruction

"The more you jump, the higher and farther your next jump will be. Improvement through use."

DAVID JONES



from rooftop to road, we've done our jobs.

I didn't see any motorcycles... Is the game limited to cars and trucks?
There are no motorcycles this time around. Perhaps in the future...

[Platforming] is certainly worth the effort. Would you agree that this is the single most evolutionary area of the game?
It's certainly one of them. From the vertical-world, to the very stylized visual presentation, to focusing entirely on the dynamic action and rapid momentum of the experience, I think we've added a number of exceptional, evolutionary aspects to the open-world, sandbox genre.

Real Time Worlds
Welcome to the sandbox.

The game has a fascinating look combining detailed textures with cell shading and a touch of normal mapping. Is this meant to lend an air of comic book sensibility lessening the depiction of realistic violence?
The unique visual presentation is meant to reflect the overall style and spirit of the game. We've aimed for a specific level of over-the-top, Hollywood-style action – with bodies flying through the air and massive explosions sending cars flipping into the sky. You are, after all, a genetically-engineered super-agent capable of jumping great heights and lifting a car above your head. A completely realistic visual style wouldn't have complemented this fun, free-form spirit. Additionally, we wanted to create a game that stood-out from similar titles, not just in terms of content and gameplay, but in its appearance as well. We think this very vibrant, colorful, semi-graphic-novel approach is a completely new art-style and the perfect way to present the madness of "Crackdown."

Does the AI detect and adjust to more than a single agent giving co-op players a leg up? And how would you manage to stay together? Can more than one agent occupy a vehicle or do you need to take separate cars?
Players in co-op mode over Xbox Live will be able to go their separate ways and tackle the gangs of Pacific City together or individually. You're not contained to the same area or region. The entire city is open to both players simultaneously and the possibilities for team destruction in such an interactive world are massive and limitless.

Last but certainly not least regarding the shooting, you've not only included a lock-on (thank you) but left us the option to go for the head shot or cripple the enemy. The ability to target different points of a target is another novel concept. Was all of this in the design doc from day one together with all of the other innovations? There's not much here that hasn't seen significant overhaul. Surely the aim is to use all of these advancements in a string of games now that the engine is built. Is a Crackdown series a foregone conclusion?
Wouldn't we love for that to be the case! Ultimately, that will be decided by how gamers respond to this go-round in Pacific City. Certainly, we can only focus on making the absolute best version of what is directly in front of us and with "Crackdown," we're confident that we've created the most intense, innovative, fun-to-play, action-packed, open-world game available. "More of the same" was never our motto! **play**

"Crackdown" is about Hollywood-style action, not satirical radio programming."

DAVID JONES

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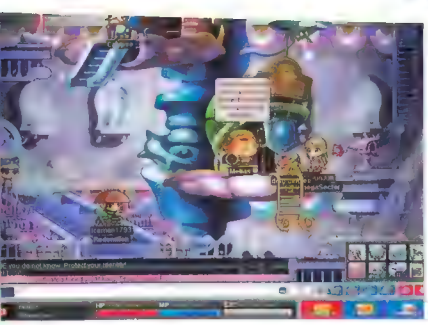

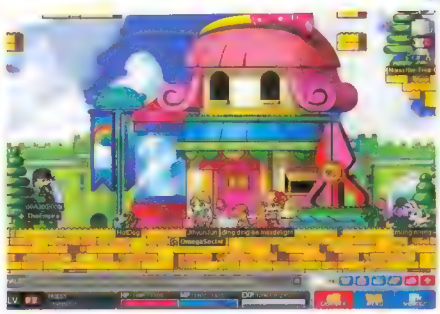

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System(s)	Nintendo DS	Publisher	Konami
Developer	Kojima Productions	Available	February

Lunar Knights

The forecast: darkness with patches of sunshine and heavy pain

words Dave Halverson

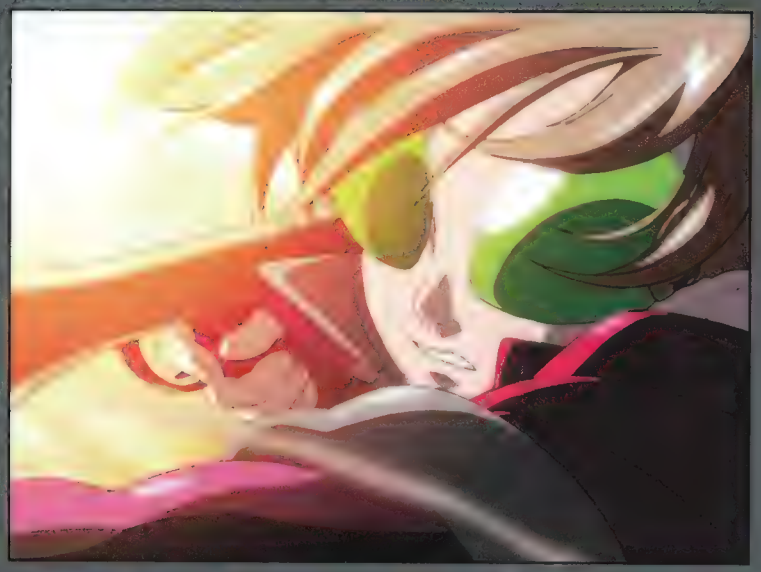
I fell madly in love with Lunar Knights at E3—who knew it would be our last in its current form—based on 5 minutes of play in the Nintendo human ant farm. As much as I respect the Metal Gear saga, I miss old school Kojima in a big way, especially having skipped the Boktai series. I wanted to embrace it, but there was just no way I could or would enjoy a game under the glare and heat of the sun. Enter the DS... more power, stylus play and a top screen; how convenient. It wasn't long before digital weather blew in from the East.

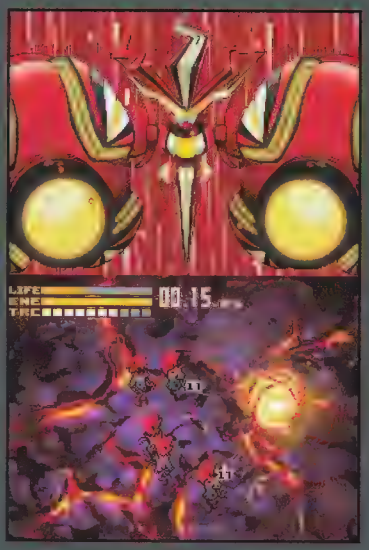
Lunar Knights represents two leaps in top-down gaming: digital weather conditions linked directly to the gameplay, and the best thing to happen to 3D shooting since the FPS. But more on that later. More importantly it's a Kojima Productions, hand-drawn, action-RPG brimming with everything you would expect from one of the world's leading and most visionary studios. To have a game like this, with so much thought and care poured into it by such a skilled developer is truly a gift. It's the next best thing since Landstalker—100% original and blessed by the man himself along with the team he has hand selected to propel his namesake into the future.

Lunar Knights drips with polish and prowess from the moment you tap start. Play begins as our anti-hero Lucian overhears a couple of Acuna locals (Acuna being the central city) discussing the state of life in the big city living under the Dark Tribes paraSOL skies. Now that Lucian is back on the prowl, no one is safe in the city of night, where the sun never shines and vampires rule. But the alternative is a life of servitude in the vampires' cursed city...not the greatest options. Lucian's sole purpose in life is to hunt down and kill every last vampire in existence by himself, most of all their lord; The Duke himself. Why is better left to the player. Aiding Lucian on his quest and his sole ally at the outset is a Terrenial named Nero. Terrenials are peaceful elemental beings, most of which have been ceased by the vampires and forced into slavery. As each boss falls, a new Terrenial becomes free and reverts back, joining either Lucian or Aaron to aid on their quest. Aaron doesn't come in for a full chapter, after which his story runs parallel to Lucian's. The tie that binds them is the Guild, the sole organization dedicated to eradicating the vampires. Having witnessed Lucian's immense strength, Bea, a Guild Gunslinger, asks him to join, to which he insolently refuses. Following this event, where Lucian takes down his first vampire general, the vampires attack the Guild in retaliation, where the son of a fallen legendary vampire hunter is training to avenge his father. Aaron wields a Solar Gun which channels its energy from the light of the sun to purify anti-life forms (vampires), however; he has yet to bond with his weapon enough to fire it. His moment of truth is our introduction to his story which also adds a completely new dimension to the game. Lucian wields the legendary Black Sword in melee combat and draws power from the light of the moon, where Aaron wields dual pistols, so

the action is split between shooting and hack-and-slash. But that's only the tip of a very big iceberg. Both Lucian and Aaron also possess the ability to transform into powerful beasts using the Trance gauge to bond with their selected Terrenial. Once transformed each possesses a special skill-set of chain attacks and draining moves. They can also both draw from the ENE gauge which measures the dark energy coursing through their bodies for special attacks and dashing. Once the gauge runs dry so does Aaron's Solar Guns, so enter one of the game's many nuances. ENE can only be recharged under the sun or moon or at participating solar stations (which are in short supply).

Where there are elements there is, of course, alchemy, handled by Acuna's resident mad scientist, Professor Sheridan. Lucian's Black Sword—created in the antiquity age by the Dark Tribes themselves—seems to be the key to prying the world out of the vampires'

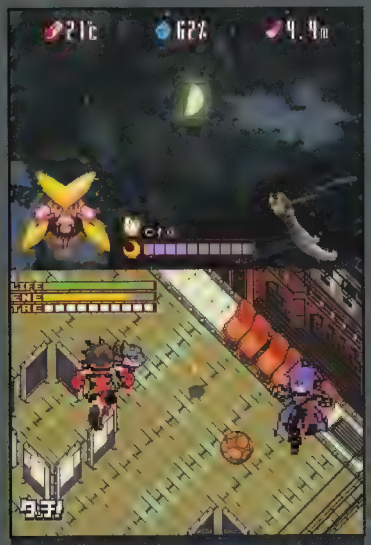




"The vampires in Lunar Knights are not your garden-variety blood suckers."

grip, and Sheridan's the only man that can restore its inherent abilities, given the appropriate materials. Deeper still, the game also has a Baldur's Gate-like experience points system to bolster Vitality, Spirit, and Skill, and a very special diversion, as if all of this top-down action-role-playing wasn't enough...It's obvious that Kojima and company are out to take full advantage of the DS's features. Their innovative use of the top screen takes care of that, but what about the stylus?

The vampires in Lunar Knights are not your garden-variety blood suckers. They've taken over the world by creating a defense mechanism impervious to the one thing that can destroy them—sunlight—called Casket Armor and as an extra precaution launched a parasol into space to block the sun, should they become exposed. The Casket Armor renders the sun's rays powerless, so for Lucian or Aaron to truly vanquish a vampire they must first destroy the Casket Armor but then expose the vulnerable vampire to sunlight...which is where Alice the sunflower girl (and the stylus) come in. Besides Nero, the only other person worthy of Lucian's company is Alice—and for good reason. Not only does she monitor Lucian from space but she does so from a satellite capable of reflecting the sun's rays into a concentrated stream.



Aaron goes in for Lucian. Switching hunters on the fly you've always got the right weapon for the job.

Once a vampire is defeated Lucian and Nero board the Casket Rocket, coffin in tow, to breach the alien sky (cue 3D-shooting KP style) and rendezvous with Alice, who then aligns the solar panels and bakes the vampire. These shooting stages represent what I believe to be coolest use of the stylus thus far; using it to both navigate the ship and shoot by tapping on incoming projectiles. You really have to see and experience it to appreciate it but paired with the game's action-role-playing chops and gorgeous anime (there's like an insane anime in here too) Lunar Knights is everything you could possibly ask for from a DS game.

The art throughout, marrying goth and sci-fi, is superb, the play mechanics and balance truly unique, and the writing dark, witty and never too verbose. As for the music, again, you really must experience it for yourself. It's like nothing else on the DS in terms of overall sophistication.

Handheld gaming represents the proliferation and evolution of gaming's rich hand-drawn heritage and Lunar Knights stands as a pinnacle of both.

Interview

Kensuke Yoshitomi (L), Lunar Knights Producer
Ikuya Nakamura (R), Lunar Knights Director

Lunar Knights Producer Kensuke Yoshitomi's credits include assistant director on Policenauts, line producer for Zone of the Enders: the 2nd Runner, and script supervisor on Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater. Director Ikuya Nakamura's credits include graphics on Metal Gear Solid, and Metal Gear: Sons of Liberty, and art direction and cg-character design on Metal Gear: Ghost Babel. Both also worked extensively on the Boktai series.

play: Your associate Igarashi-san also likes to extinguish vampires. What is it about them that make them such tempting fodder?

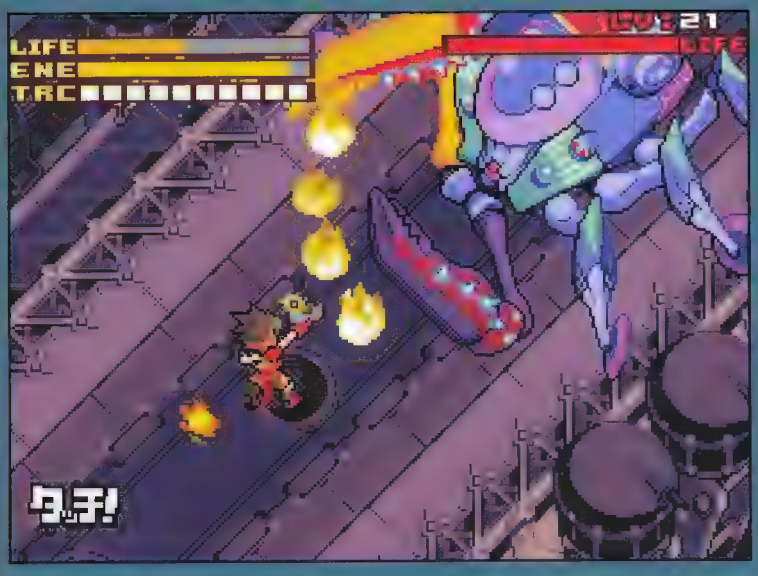
Kensuke Yoshitomi: What's fun about beating up vampires is they are stronger than humans and they don't die in normal ways. One of the attractive things about vampires is that they retain some intellectual bearings even though they are monsters. One of the larger missions in Lunar Knights is to conquer these strong but clever opponents.

Ikuya Nakamura: In Boktai, we had players use the Solar Sensor to purify vampires using actual sunlight. But in Lunar Knights, we have taken that concept further by extending the stage to outer space. Players now pilot the Casket Rocket and transport fallen vampires to the solar power at the Purifex for purification.

I like the stealth touches reminiscent of the 8-bit Metal Gear (love the whistling!). Were these designed with that game in mind—a mark of its Kojima heritage?

KY: Whistling is one of the elements we are very proud of! In games, even if you create a solid and deep battle system, having the same actions will just lead to monotonous game play. This is why we're implementing more than just stealth elements in order to give the game a variety of gameplay, setting it apart from other games. Among those features we've included 3D shooting stages and burst attacks that use the DS stylus and microphone, as well as plenty of RPG and

> "The world of LK is gothic horror mixed with a lot of other elements such as sci-fi and fantasy."
>
> ~ Kensuke Yoshitomi, Producer



Add, character elements.
KY: We do love and respect the Metal Gear series, but we very want to focus on how to surprise players with new experiences. But that idea in itself is something that was passed down from Mr. Kojima and is one of our policies at Konami Production.

In LK we switch between the very attractive Lucian and the timid but determined Aaron. What was the genesis of these personas?
KY: The moon versus the sun, darkness versus light, sword versus gun... we intentionally brought two opposing characters to the game to have this interesting juxtaposition. We've added realism elements to the character setting, too. The character setting isn't realistic, but the emotions depicted in the game are based off our own experiences. Lucian is a skilled vampire hunter who has a negative personality. He tries to keep his distance with others. On the other end of the spectrum is Aaron...who is far from an experienced gunslinger, but is very friendly.
A main part of the story is how these two different types of characters meet and cooperate to battle against the vampires.

Some of the character designs are quite a departure for KY as is the extraordinary soundtrack...
KY: The world of LK is gothic horror mixed with a lot of other elements such as sci-fi and fantasy. It's quite obvious that we have included many influences from our favorite games, anime, manga, movies, and music. The good news is that while the game has a very diverse theme, it's not a mess of unrelated ideas and inspirations. Gothic horror, sci-fi, and fantasy have all come together to form something very interesting and unique. A lot of this comes down to how cool the game looks. Every element in the game —from characters, weapons, mechanics, backgrounds, story, voice-overs, and music—have been designed very carefully in order to express the ultimate sci-fi gothic game.
IN: Cool character design is one of the highlights of Lunar Knights. As you can see, we have designed characters with a mysterious gothic and cool sci-fi look. The musical concept was "Urban vampire hunting." We tried to keep it away from futuristic influences, and in turn entered purely of jazz and big band sounds.

There is some gorgeous anime in here! Who produced it? Is Lunar Knights going to be an anime series? This would be a most joyous occasion!
KY: So you love animation and DS, don't you? Don't they love?
The animation and CG was created by a famous Japanese animation production company called Studio 4°C best known for their work on The Animatrix and Memories.
IN: Compared to other DS titles we have seen of Castlevania and FF3, I would love to make Lunar Knights into an anime series.

What is your appraisal of the NDS's performance?
KY: The Nintendo DS has still be the most successful machine in regards to DS games, but we think it's the most difficult to develop for. The mainstream market all wanted 3D games, but nowadays it doesn't matter as much whether games are in 2D or 3D. We believe that it all comes down to whether the game is fun and quite serves as presented in the appropriate dimension. And, just so you know, we consider our users as one of the amazing this game

industry's best! We're also very proud of the 3D elements in the game.

The Casket Rocket shooting levels are sublime and I can't believe how fun and effective the stylus is controlling them. How difficult was this to achieve? You guys need to make an Axelay DS!
KY: Wow, AXELAY? Such a sweet, old classic!
The good thing about the stylus is it's easy to pick up and play, and gamers know exactly what's happening on the screen. The player can also feel more interactively with the game itself.
So when we started creating the Casket Rocket shooting stages, we started with a policy of making use of the Nintendo DS features effectively. This policy and early brainstorming resulted in a shooting stage that can only be controlled with the stylus. One of the hardest parts about the design was balance. One challenge we had to overcome was how to allow players to attack and move their ship without it being frustrating. It was also challenging to adjust the angle so players can see what enemies lie in front of their ships. We hope that many gamers enjoy the new shooting stages in Lunar Knights!

How close is the Lunar Knights universe to the Boktai games? Or is this a new beginning? Do you look at this as the 3rd in the series or the first in a new series?
KY: Lunar Knights is our new IP, but its timeline does have some relation to Boktai. Anyone who played previous Boktai games may smile when they see familiar things. But since Lunar Knights is a fresh beginning, players can jump into it without worrying whether or not they know the back-story and play mechanics. You can think of it as a parallel world to that of Boktai.

Although I understood the novelty of it, Boktai was inconvenient. The DS seems like the perfect device to hone your day/night charging system. Did you realize this right away?

KY: The Sun Sensor in Boktai was quite inconvenient, but it was something we wanted players to experience along with the other parts of the game. But it truly was unfair to players in Norway, for example, where there isn't a lot of sunlight.
IN: Kojima Productions put a lot of thought into this dilemma which is why the Nintendo DS seemed like such a perfect fit for Lunar Knights. When Mr. Kojima heard the news about the dual screen for the DS, he said, "Have the sun and moon on the top screen!"

What's the word on a Lunar Knights II?
KN: Whether or not we create Lunar Knights II all depends on the reaction from gamers. If we hear cries for a sequel, then we'll make it!
But in the meantime, we're not holding anything back for a sequel while we develop Lunar Knights. We're throwing everything we've got into making this a must-have title on Nintendo DS.

I love the game but would love it even more if it had jumping...Is it too difficult to add that tier of gameplay with this viewpoint?
KN: We just figured you could jump in games like DDR... but in all seriousness, we believe that jumping action wouldn't be appropriate given the isometric angle of Lunar Knights. But we do understand that jumping would freshen up the gameplay even more.
If we do continue the series, implementing a jump feature is something we definitely will consider.

I really like the Bea character. If the story continues might we see a female Gunslinger?
KY: We are glad to hear you liked Bea! She does play a big role over the story, but unfortunately, you cannot play as her this time. But we'll remember your comments as we move forward with our next project. We totally agree that female vampire hunters are cool! **play**

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System(s)	PS3, Xbox 360, PC	Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	Ubisoft Montreal	Available	November

Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Vegas

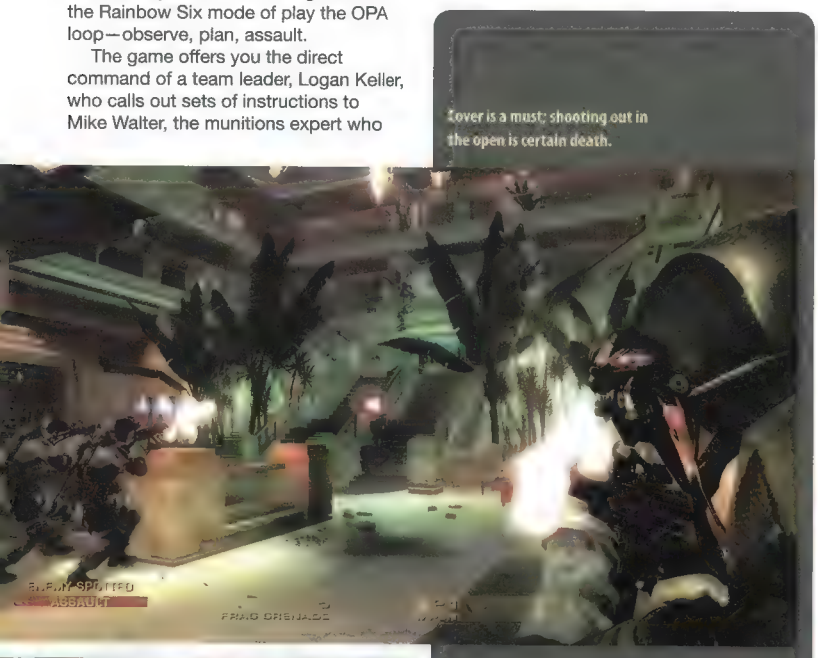
words **Brady Fiechter**

It's not so easy getting away with what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas when strippers and booze are replaced by terrorists numbering in the hundreds, skillfully outfitted with bombs and special-ops equipment and grenades and dozens of weapons. The terrorists in Rainbow Six: Vegas are just as well-equipped as you, pulling out night vision goggles and thermal binoculars, setting up traps and increasing in skill along the path of your own advancement.

Tension, realism, tactics—three major components the Rainbow Six: Vegas team are focusing on to bring the bloody battles alive as you hunt the enemy through vaults, hotels, warehouses and may other locations based on the gaudy night-lit Vegas strip. Close-quarter battles dominate the action, setting up firefights that will take you out in an instant if you aren't strapped into a methodical, tactical way of progression. The designers call the Rainbow Six mode of play the OPA loop—observe, plan, assault.

The game offers you the direct command of a team leader, Logan Keller, who calls out sets of instructions to Mike Walter, the munitions expert who blows stuff up, and Jung Park, the lighter precision guy who is more adept at recon. The three-man army works together in a number of ways, but you're always in control when you want to be. New to this year's game is a cover feature, which pulls you into a 3rd person mode against walls and obstacles, opening up a more assertive approach to sneaking, strategizing and jumping into blind- and peak-fire situations.

Many details must be taken into account when preparing for a confrontation. Rate of fire may be altered to minimize noise; rules of engagement must be considered to bypass unnecessary carnage and maintain the element of surprise. If you're afraid of going in too quickly, a snake cam can be used to observe behind closed doors, where the terrorists can be tagged for their kill order.



"Close-quarter battles dominate the action, setting up firefights that will take you out in an instant..."

In an effort to keep you constantly engaged in the tense tactical battles, the designers have avoided the briefing rooms and cinematic mission structures you might expect. A picture-in-picture cam relays details from an information officer in real-time as you play, and scripted moments and other story beats are handled through, say, hostages relaying information or conversations between terrorists.

Rainbow Six: Vegas will of course continue its online push, with deathmatch scenarios joined by more complicated modes like attack and defend, where mission-based objectives come into play, pitting teams against each other to rescue hostages, defuse bombs and run the gamut of item extractions. Several maps are being created across the major modes, and if you want to jump into the single-player campaign, up to 4 players can team up. For a little added in-your-face satisfaction, literally map your own face onto the soldiers, with the use of the Xbox live vision camera. With the power of the Xbox 360, it's definitely a kick to see detailed likenesses of your real-life competition getting popped in the Rainbow Six: Vegas world. **play**

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System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Namco Bandai Games
Developer	Cavia Inc.	Available	November 14

Naruto Uzumaki Chronicles

Cavia does anime right...again

words **Dave Halverson**

Bandai certainly drew the long straw when Naruto franchises were being handed out; not that Clash and especially Ninja Council 1&2 aren't good games. It's just that following the wonderfully Smash Bros.-like 'Ultimate Ninja', Uzumaki Chronicles gives them the proverbial leg up, as UC succeeds in the same vein; breaking from the rest of the traditional anime-based fighting pack. And what a crowded pack it has become.

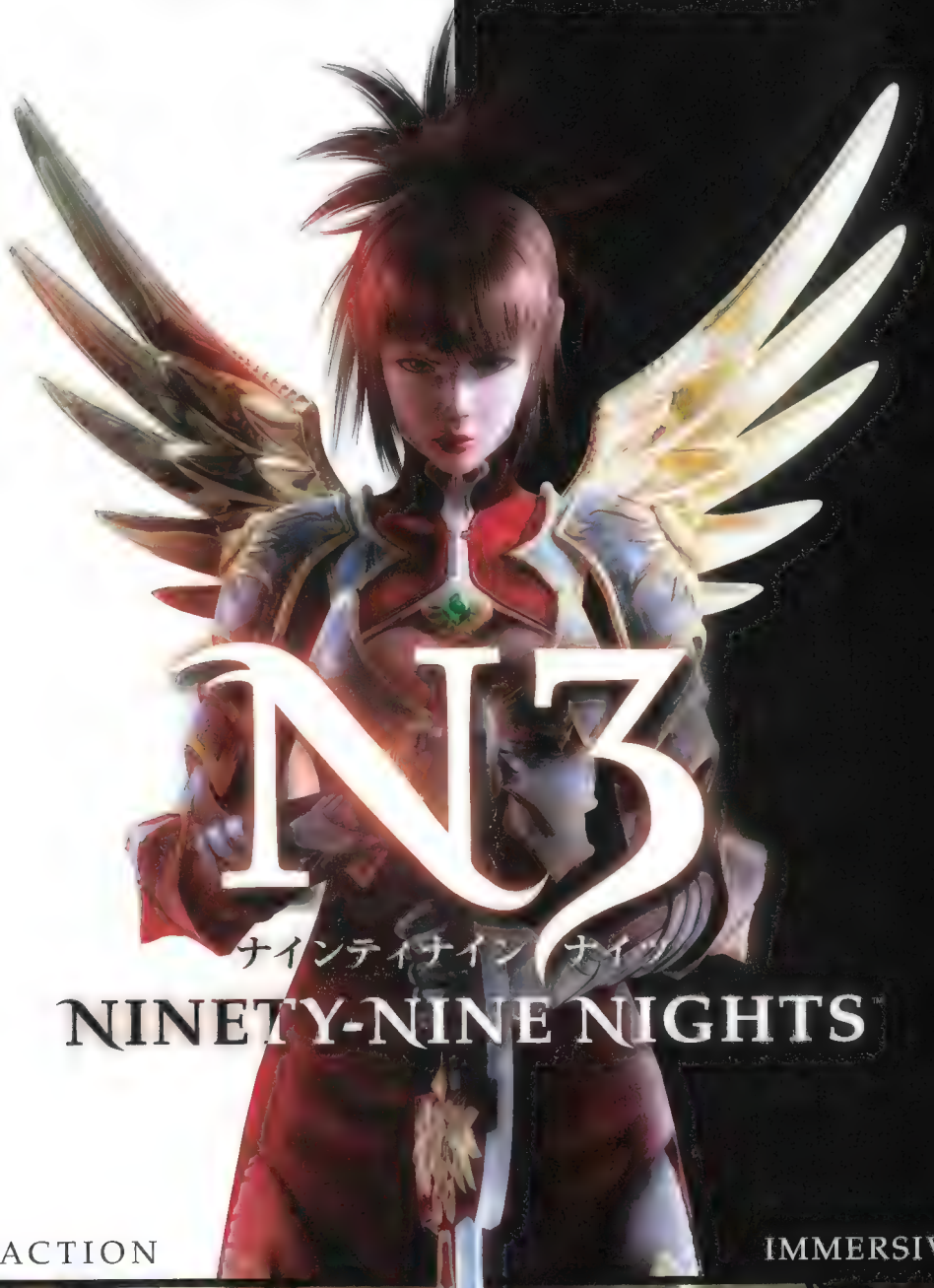
While UC isn't an all-out free-roaming adventure, it is a mission-based fighting RPG through and through, and a well put together one at that. The game rides on an overhead map in and around Hidden Leaf Village dotted with locations key to the flow of information and story. Roaming from place to place, players are interrupted by battles just as they would be in a traditional RPG, only these are spectacular open-area free roaming battles—among the best ever seen on PS2. Not only is the action fine tuned to the "T"—gotta love the slope collision and detail such as knee-high flora—but the systems at work are just as impressive, including a tap-on tap-off lock-on and a simple yet perfectly apropos control scheme toggling between Jutsus, combos, and switching characters...which leads us to the game's wonderful party system. Along the way, as you knock out mission after mission—some silly, some not so—different characters key to the story will come along for the ride, making them available for future missions to toggle in and out of situations given the task ahead. The game also features an RPG-like leveling-up system where you cannot only raise attributes Baldur's Gate-style, but sell earned Virtue won in battle to increase health or stamina, or buy Skill Chips to be placed on the Skill Plates, which can also be upgraded, essentially giving you complete control over your character's attributes. The game could do with a save on the fly feature and the ability to skip previously viewed in-game movies, but otherwise it's another classy game for Naruto fans. **play**

> "While UC isn't an all-out free-roaming adventure, it is a mission-based fighting RPG through and through."

A Sweeping Saga

An Ancient Betrayal

A Battle To End All Battles



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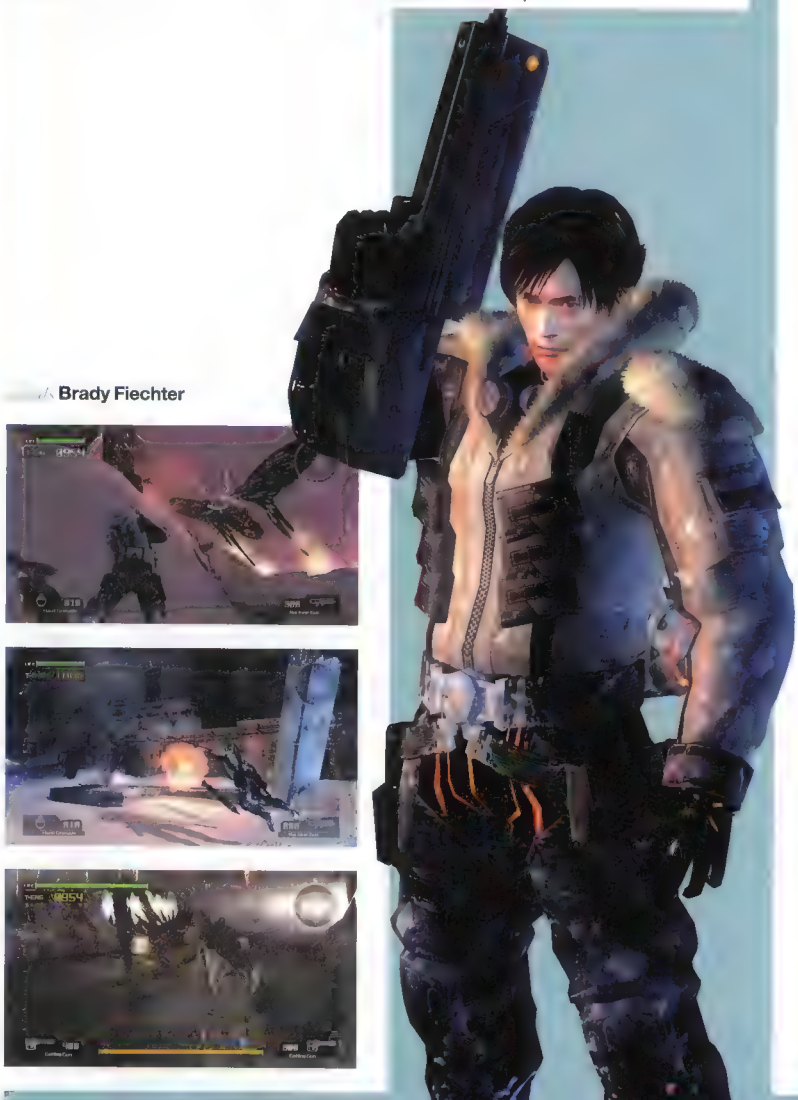
System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Capcom
Developer	Capcom	Available	January

Lost Planet

"...the Akrid have nothing better to do than kill every human who dares tread on their home turf."



Brady Fiechter

The conditions on the arctic wasteland of Lost Planet are so inhospitable, humans can't even survive indoors without the protection of a technology called Vital Suits. These bulky suits look like they've been designed by an offshoot of the US Army consulting with some hip 22nd century fashion designer. Now that man can travel where no man has gone before, deep in the heart of blizzardy mountain ranges and underground ice caverns, it's only natural that a mega corporation—driven of course by pure malevolence—is up to no good in this treacherous land.

The Neo Venus Construction Corporation isn't the only problem on Lost Planet. Indigenous creatures known as the Akrid have nothing better to do than kill every human who dares tread on their home turf. The Akrid spill out of giant sacks and holes in walls, shoot from under the snow and fly from the sky, well versed in such killing skills as impalement, stomping and crushing.

As Wayne, tortured soul who just saw his father's life taken by one particular Akrid the size of an apartment duplex, you have a few killing skills of your own, such as machine guns, rocket launchers, grenades and shotguns. Given The Lost Planet's difficult terrain, mechs have become a staple mode of locomotion, serving as mechanical war machines that pack immense firepower and zip around with rocket boosters. Even more fun is the grappling gun, which snaps onto accepting surfaces to lift you to higher ground or safely drop to dangerous regions.

So threatening is the Lost Planet that even the Vital Suits are constantly breaking down. The destruction of any Akrid or other living organism releases thermal energy, which must be collected to refresh the layer of protection in the suits. A timer is constantly counting down on your suit, making it imperative that the trigger finger is constantly engaged.

This is an action game on full throttle, which brings the dynamic of online play into effect. Japanese games don't often go full-bore on the deathmatch, but here you get 16-player competition like elimination, team elimination, capture the flag and fugitive. Co-op play is also being implemented. **play**

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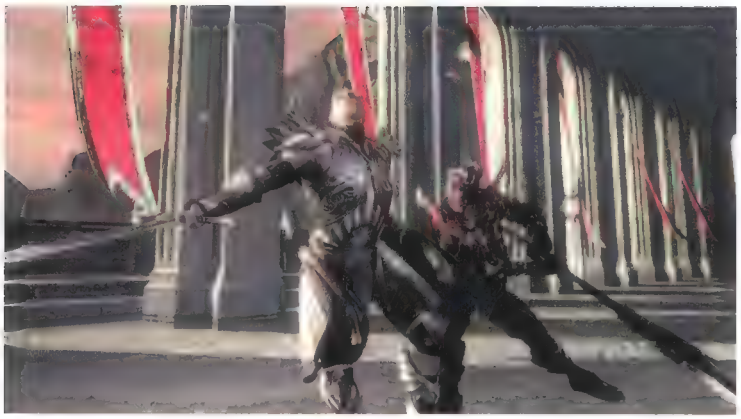

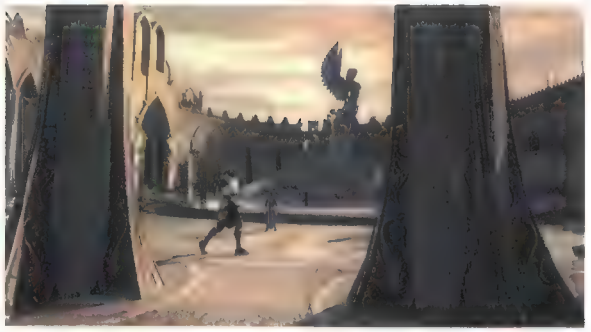

The immense level of detail spills into every corner.

sword, and lure your spear-bearing enemy down into the trenches.

Character development in Elveon was promised to be unique to each player. If you're someone who loves the snap of the bow, you can upgrade your avatar to be proficient with arrows alone. A sweet feature of the game is the idea of the Dragon Room, where stat upgrades are made. The hero dreams of four pathways, each with a god or divine creature representing a weapon skill, and chooses the direction of his development from here. Being a gamer who loves immersion, it is with happy relief that I see combat upgrades arriving from an in-story metaphor. There's nothing I hate more than dropping out of a lush background to stare at some menu for a few minutes. Elveon pledges to do away with this, both with the Dragon Room, and in-game weapon switching.

Elveon isn't going to be released until late 2007, and much of the game is bound to change before then. 10Tacle has even suggested that the PC game will be different from the 360 edition, and that perhaps the console Elveon will be more action-oriented, and the desktop version rely more on RPG elements. As of right now, the game doesn't use the weather engine, which will pull at garments and hair with water and wind, nor does the game run off of more than one core. The international Slovakian team pledges to continue striving for something really unique and satisfying; a game with powerful, heavy heroes burdened by the weight of a thousand years of history, stepping through a natural world both graceful and oppressive. **play**

"Being a gamer who loves immersion, it is with happy relief that I see combat upgrades arriving from an in-story metaphor."

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PlayStation Portable

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System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Tecmo
Developer	Tecmo	Available	November 2006

Paradise Lost . . . and found once more

words **Greg Orlando**

Tomonobu Itagaki, the man behind Tecmo's Dead or Alive titles, is eating a giant hamburger with chopsticks. He's sitting outside on a glorious Hawaiian afternoon, right next to the giant pool with its accompanying hot tub, faux rock slide that's been dubbed—for its coarse exterior and punishing final bump —"the bleeder," and waterfall.

It is perhaps 80F, and there is a slight wind. Palm trees rustle softly in the background and the air, perhaps filtered by thousands of miles of the Pacific Ocean, is pure and fresh. Right now, there is no finer place on Earth than this mansion Tecmo has rented, and no more perfect venue to show off the idyllic beach adventure Dead or Alive Xtreme 2.

Later, Itagaki will adjourn, with his translator, to a dimly lit and air conditioned meeting room or to the mansion's spacious dining hall to talk about his new game, an Xbox 360 exclusive, and the sequel to 2003's Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball. He will answer countless questions from the assembled game writers about tan lines and minigames, online play and ninja.

"For me, in my philosophy of design," Itagaki says, " I usually start off with a product that, in its first iteration, is rough around the edges and just kind of a basic expression of a concept." The second game in the series, he notes, is where this rough-hewn idea becomes polished and refined.

"I've never had a game—a second game in a series—that was unsuccessful," he says. "I've had games that were first in a series that were unsuccessful."

Inside the mansion, people are sitting down to play an early version of Xtreme that Itagaki's brought straight from Tecmo's Team Ninja headquarters in Japan. As it stands, the game is missing its story mode, the one where the females from the Dead or Alive fighting game series travel to a deserted and suitably gorgeous tropical island to compete against one another in a series of challenges, and then pose provocatively in swimsuits. Right now, fun under Dead or Alive Xtreme 2's high-definition sun consists of six minigames: beach volleyball, pool hopping, jetski racing, tug-of-war, butt bump, and flag racing.

"I usually start off with a product that, in its first iteration, is rough around the edges and just kind of a basic expression of a concept."

Volleyball and pool hopping are holdovers from Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball, but both have been altered for Xtreme 2. This time around, the pace for Xtreme's two-on-two volleyball will be a lot quicker, Itagaki asserts, and

Any one up for a game of volley ball?

the play style more aggressive. A new feature allows players to set up quick spikes, something the game's new character Kokoro, will be exceedingly good at. Further, emphasis is being taken away from feint attacks, strategic soft hits that oftentimes won points in the original game, and refocused on blocking and smashmouth spiking both at the net and from mid-court. For the hopping minigame, players are required to guide their female protagonist across the length of a pool, jumping on colored platforms to avoid a dunking. Itagaki has turned this contest of skill into a race; an artificial intelligence-controlled Dead or Alive warrior has been added for players to compete against.

The marine race portion seems to be the most intriguing of the new minigames, with players cutting across a series of exaggeratedly blue and sparkling seas on jetskis. Here, it's necessary to beat four other females by carefully navigating around a series of buoys, through water-based obstacles such as piers, and over huge ramps. Speed boosts are awarded for players who successfully make their way through the buoys, and the "X" button on the Xbox 360's controller performs a series of stunts where a female racer will stand on her jetski, do flips over its handlebars, or steer while directly facing the game's camera. Various spins, and other maneuvers such as barrel rolls will be possible after making a jump off a ramp and then pressing the Xbox 360's left analog stick in certain directions. Marine race, along with volleyball, will be playable online; racing supports four players via Xbox 360 Live and volleyball allows for one-on-one action.

Dead or Alive warriors can also pit their fearsome, well-toned asses against one another in a butt bumping contest. This battle of the bulge puts two girls on one floating platform, requiring them to slam each other—the mode allows for both strong and weak bump attacks via the Xbox controller's left analog stick, as well as for dodges and sidesteps—with the goal being to send the opponent into the drink. Here, Itagaki notes slyly, a competitor such as the wrestler Tina, who is more powerfully built, will be better suited to butt bumping than, say, the petite schoolgirl Hitomi.

Flag racing hearkens back to the Konami arcade classic Track & Field, with the women starting off each race on their stomachs. Rapid-fire button tapping speeds a woman to the finish line, where she must dive for a flag in order to win. In tug-of-war, two females are placed on floating platforms, with each holding one end of a short rope. Both yanks and feints are possible, and females teetering on a platform's edge can recover their balance if their handler quickly presses the Xbox controller's "A" button. The loser is, of course, the one who falls. A seventh minigame, by the by, one featuring a giant water slide, has been planned but not yet implemented.

After a day in the sun, the females can retire to New Zack Island's casino, where a reworked poker mode lets players try their hands, literally, against those of Dead or Alive's contingent of ninja, assassins, and wrestlers. Every one of the cast members included here will play according to her personality, Itagaki says.

"Trying to guess what Kasumi is going to do is pretty futile," he says. "She's always kind of thinking of something else, or following the voice inside of her." The assassin Christie will be more cutthroat at the poker table. "Christie is out for the kill at the poker table as well," he says, "You better watch out." Slot machines have also been revamped, with the characters getting new themed one-armed bandits. Christie's slot machine, in particular, will hold a very interesting surprise, Itagaki says cryptically.

The game is fleshed out with tan lines, a 20-song strong soundtrack ("we spent about as much on the licensing royalties for the songs as it would take to make a whole other game," Itagaki says), and a photo mode where players can put their favorite volleyballer into one of 180 different settings and take snapshots.

Swimsuits are a deadly serious business here, and Xtreme 2's creator specifically set out to address what he felt were deficiencies in terms of the original game's apparel. First and foremost, each suit will have its own personality, he says; Xtreme Beach Volleyball suffered because a lot of its suits were too similar to one another. Also, Volleyball had made it difficult, perhaps unduly so, for players to acquire all the game's bathing suits for each of its characters. Now, he says, he's removed any limitations, and it will be a lot easier to collect swimwear.

"The first game you were kind of jumping to keep from falling into pits. In this new game, you're jumping for joy, jumping for happiness," he says. **play**

Virtua Fighter 5

Sega gets Five . . . for fighting

System(s): PlayStation 3
Publisher: Sega

Virtua fist, rest assured, will meet virtua face this spring. Virtua Fighter 5, Sega's popular arcade fighting game has an exclusive date with the PlayStation 3.

Sega will present a sweet 17 brawlers here. Old favorites such as Akira Yuki,

Marvel: Ultimate All

Who could dare to supersede me?

System(s): PS2, PS3, Xbox, Xbox 360, PC, NDS, Wii
Publisher: Activision

In the history of recorded time, mankind has seen prime time, Miller Time, Hammer time, and daylight savings time. Now, however, there can be no debate, no room for discussion. This, truly, is clobbering time.

Activision's gathered together 20-plus heroes from the Marvel comic book universe as playable characters for the action role-playing game Marvel: Ultimate Alliance. Here, players can build and customize four-man squads, picking and choosing from powerful superbeings such as Captain America, the Incredible Hulk, Spider-Man, Dr. Strange, Ghost Rider, Wolverine, Iron Man, The Thing, Mr. Fantastic, Human Torch, and Thor. All told, the game promises approximately 140 heroes, villains, and bit players.

A playable demo featured such villains as the Scorpion, the projectile-tossing Bullseye, and Radioactive Man. The giant dragon Fin Fang Foom served as a boss

Best-of series Part 3

shooters!

Shooting—it's one of the most fundamental aspects of gaming—has been since day one. As each genesis has run its course, developers have found ways to make them new again, pushing us from primitive shooters like Missile Command and Space Invaders, to a fantastic generation of side-scrollers and overhead shooters, action shooters, and finally first-person shooters which belong in a category all their own (which they'll get next issue). Whether you prefer old or new or are new to gaming you'll find a wealth of diverse shooters among these picks.

modus operandi

Trends of the year

THE MOTHERSHIP - In the days of 16 pixel x 16 pixel sprites, shooters wowed us with massive ships that were three screens long. We were too dumb to know that they were just static backgrounds with a few turrets stuck on 'em, but that doesn't make 'em any less magical.

20XX - It isn't clear what exact year 20XX represents, but we'll know it has come when the events of 700 late-'80s space shooters occur simultaneously.

SPREAD-SHOT OR LASER - You can have a spread-shot that fires in a wide arc but does little damage, or you can have a laser that does heavy damage, but only right in front. To have both in one ship? IMPOSSIBLE! Even in 20XX.

Floating letters always lead to something good…but wait for them to come to you!

Alert the military! Lasers, massive light beams, and homing missiles are powerful weapons but nothing is as dangerous as multiple streams of colored dots!

In the near-future, we will likely lose our ability to speak proper English and instead enthrall alien invaders by saying stuff like, "Main screen turn on," "What you say?" and "Take off every zig for great justice."

Intelligence is not a prerequisite, especially if you're going to be buried as a smoldering corpse who decided to take cover behind an explosive barrel.

Tentacles are high fashion for today's hyperviolent, on-the-go boss monster.

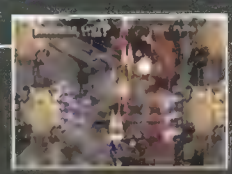
Today's modern airplanes can avoid destruction by looping. Hopefully, in the near-future, scientists will be able to develop a plane that can loop more than three times.

The lone gunman - The fate of the Earth / mankind / the universe itself rests on the brink, and as a civilization, we... send out one lone ship and pray to God it can overcome the odds. You'd think we'd put out a slight bit more of an effort.

OPTIONS!! - No self-respecting spacecraft goes into the heat of battle without little orb thingies floating around it. They shoot, they protect us from enemy crafts and all the space junk that's flying around, they're stylish—the ultimate in after-market upgrades.

Consensus Top 10 play

1. Radiant Silvergun
2. Sin & Punishment
3. Panzer Dragoon Orta
4. Gunstar Heroes
5. Ikaruga
6. Contra Hard Corps
7. Metal Slug 3
8. Gunvalkyrie
9. Ranger X
10. Einhander



Dave Halverson
Editor in Chief

My first shooter was Gyruss on the Atari 5200. I remember getting it for my birthday and staying up all night in complete disbelief that such a thing was actually in my room. The fact that 23 years later I can recall the moment like it was yesterday is a testament to gaming's golden years. I often wonder if that level of awe even exists today where the average gamer isn't happy unless a game consumes more hours than the average work week, after which it's put on the shelf. I've been playing Sin & Punishment (a two-hour game) for 6 years…now that's a long game.

Narrowing 20 years' worth of shooters down to ten in each category was no easy task. Leaving so many great choices on the cutting room floor was gut wrenching. I have to say though, going back to play these games again made me wish more than ever that the side-scrolling shooter wasn't a relic of the past. Maybe someday gamers will realize that a mind-blowing few hours of intense gameplay is just as worthy as a 40-hour-long epic. If not, we'll always have the past. And what a great trip it's been.

Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

The first game I ever played for the first system I ever owned was Zaxxon on ColecoVision. Shooters quickly became my genre of choice in my early gaming years, dominating the arcade play and taking most of my waking hours in the home. There's something about these games that tickles my gameplay nerve in a most unique way—the geometric interaction with the bullet patterns, the instinct of avoidance, the rhythm you fall into pushing through the streams of chaos, reacting more than thinking. Perhaps no other genre holds up to the test of time like a shooter, still entertaining back to the 8-bit days. Visual presentation and control schemes aren't as crucial to their effect, which gives the shooter, to me, some of the purest form of gameplay. It's a shame modern gaming hasn't much room left to host what could still be the elegant simplicity that is the shooter.

Nick Des Barres
Japanese Correspondent

Shoot. Dodge. Dodge. Shoot. These instincts are primal – dodge the wooly mammoth; shoot it with your atlatl. They will always remain essential components of action gaming (it's a rare title indeed that does not incorporate some variant of dodging and shooting), though the game template as it existed in the 8- and 16-bit eras is now all but gone. It's a shame, as I can think of no other genre that was so frenetic, visceral, and demanding. A quality shooter requires moment-to-moment monitoring of the situation, and a lapse in concentration for even a second often literally meant death. Assembling this list was difficult: I had a pool of over 50 candidates, and the lack of a Darius or R-Type in the list was an unfortunate consequence of whittling down one of my favorite genres to a list of twenty. We may never see a return to the glory days of the early 90s, when seemingly every Japanese third party was pumping out "shmups" (Lord, what an awful term) with abandon. But with boutique houses like G.rev, Cave and Treasure still committed to the genre, almost like aficionados of black-and-white film or analog synthesiser equipment, it's safe to say shooters will never truly die.

Greg Orlando
Senior Editor

In the dim, Lik-m-aid and Pixy Stix-fueled haze of my youth, I spent roughly the gross national product of a small, possibly derelict, South American country on trips to the arcade. And it was around that time of carefree innocence and calloused index fingers that I discovered true love: Love of blasting things until I couldn't see straight. Love of blasting things until the quarters ran out, or there was no more stuff to shoot.

Now, as I march single-mindedly to senility and death with the grim determination of a war prisoner, I'll be damned if I can clearly discern between a shooter and an action shooter. But by splitting hairs, I was aiming at the wrong target. What mattered was that I could name 50 shooters at the drop of a hat, and quote chapter and verse on how they'd moved me. And that, plainly put, struck home.

Mike Griffin
PC Editor

From power-ups to boss fights, no other form of gaming has you navigating through flotsam and fireworks with the immediacy of a good traditional shooter. The horizontal and vertical scrolling greats honed our early cognizance of patterns and pacing in twitch skill games. The masterworks tend to defy technology and time. Games like Gunstar Heroes and Radiant Silvergun look, sound and play amazing to this day. One's engagement in a traditional shooter does not rely on aesthetic complexity, however. Witness the minimalism of Tempest/Tempest 2000 and its exquisite synergy of playfield and gameplay. At another point in the spectrum, Metal Slug 3 and Gradius V wouldn't be the same without their opulent presentation. And while Panzer Dragoon Zwei's 3D world begged the Saturn for more, its patterns and pacing are built of sumptuous textures indeed. I salute the craft of these fine shooters

Eric L. Patterson
Contributing Editor

My selection of shooters may be a bit odd... I've never been a fan of the hardcore, dodge a thousand bullets type of shooter (with a few exceptions), so I tend to gravitate to the more "unusual" ones. I also, and this may sound weird, love shooters with a lot of powering up or ship enhancement: anything from Terra Cresta's ship combining to Mars Matrix's weapon beefing. Galaga may seem like a strange choice for my #1 traditional shooter, but I've loved this game for what seems like forever. That love has been rekindled thanks to Xbox Live Arcade, where I can compete online with friends instead of just trying for the high score at the local pizza place. I'd love to see more titles from my lists show up on XBL (or other online-friendly services)... Twinkle Star Sprites especially. As for my #1 action shooter, is there really anything better than Pocky & Rocky? No way.

Casey Loe
Contributing Editor

While most genre classics don't hold up to modern scrutiny, a great shooter like R-Type is nearly as enthralling today as it was in 1987. Perhaps this timelessness is part of the reason the genre has withered so; the 2D shooter is nearly extinct, and only a few good 3D series (like Panzer Dragoon) have risen to replace it. Action must be taken now! Everyone write to U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan and demand that he reunite the R-Type, Darius, and 19XX teams—by force if necessary—and lock them in underground bunkers with nothing but food, water, chemical latrines and Xbox Live Arcade development kits. There they can perfect their art without interference from muckety-muck publishers, 2D-hating consumers and constantly changing technological standards. (Treasure may remain free to continue work on their rumored Ikaruga sequel, but should be monitored by armed U.N. peacekeepers at all times.)

TOP 10s

Nick Des Barres

Dai Kohama

TGS 2006 SPECIAL part 1

Nick Des Barres & Dai Kohama

Shows just prior to system launches are always the most memorable, remaining in mind long after mid-generation events fade into a mess of bright lights, big breasts and crushing crowds. I have little doubt Tokyo Game Show 2006 will prove to be any exception, as it provided the first tangible, concrete PlayStation 3 experience, with 27 playable games running on actual, finalized hardware (as opposed to the monolithic development units at E3), and has proved to many a fickle Japanese gamer that the system actually exists, is in fact quite powerful, and *really is* coming out on November 11th.

It's safe to say this was Sony's show, despite the strongest showing Microsoft has ever made in Japan, with an RPG-heavy lineup for 2007. Disappointingly, Nintendo would not allow the unwashed masses (192,411 attendees this year -- the most ever) to get their hands on Wii at Tokyo Game Show, and the only systems at the show were demonstrated at the Konami and Sega booths by svelte "campaign girls" (the Japanese term for "booth babe"). This is a puzzling choice; the platform was for all intents and purposes completely absent from the show, allowing Sony to steal virtually all the available thunder. Seriously, Nintendo, we love ya, but it's time to get off the private-show high horse and show the public why radical new control is better than all the tech in the world. Back in PS3 Land, Capcom's Devil May Cry 4 and Sega's Virtua Fighter 5, fully playable, were particularly impressive, and surprise debuts like Level-5's White Knight Story and Tecmo's Ninja Gaiden Sigma did much to bolster credibility for a platform beleaguered with nothing but bad press.

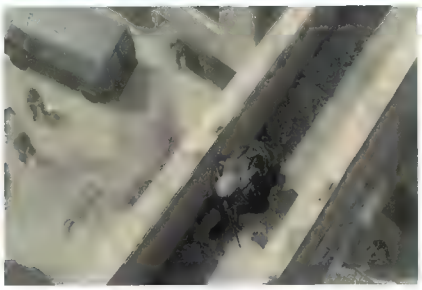
Xbox 360 had as good a showing as can possibly be imagined for a system with only 160,000 units sold (less than a thirtieth of what it has sold in the West), and seems to be on its way to modest success in Japan, due largely to a surprisingly robust RPG lineup headlined by Hironobu Sakaguchi's Blue Dragon and Lost Odyssey. With other triple-A titles like Capcom's Lost Odyssey on the horizon, the system could finally find a solid niche among hard-core Japanese gamers, conceivably moving one to two million units in the upcoming year.

"It's safe to say this was Sony's show, despite the strongest showing Microsoft has ever made in Japan..."

We now present for your review the key games on display, along with glimpses at various aspects of what makes the Tokyo Game Show so whimsical and decidedly *un*-trade show. Next month, watch for Part 2 of our show coverage, with closer looks at promising titles and developer interviews.

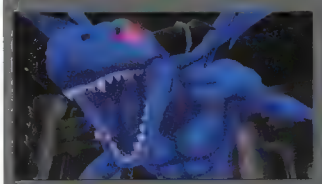
	Top 10 Playable Games
01	**Lost Planet** Capcom / Xbox 360
02	**Devil May Cry 4** Capcom / PlayStation 3
03	**Blue Dragon** Microsoft / Xbox 360
04	**Virtua Fighter 5** Sega / PlayStation 3
05	**Trusty Bell/Eternal Sonata** Microsoft / Xbox 360
06	**Lost Odyssey** Microsoft / Xbox 360
07	**The Eye of Judgment** Sony / PlayStation 3
08	**MGS: Portable Ops** Kojima Productions / PSP
09	**Dragon Quest Monsters Joker**Square Enix / NDS
10	**Seiken Densetsu 4** Dawn of Mana Square Enix / PS2

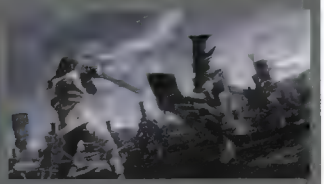
	Top 10 Unplayable Games
01	**Metal Gear Solid 4** Kojima Productions / PS3
02	**White Knight Story** Sony / PlayStation 3
03	**Ninja Gaiden Sigma** Tecmo / PlayStation 3
04	**Fabula Nova Crystallis: FF XIII** Square Enix / Various
05	**Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII** Square Enix / PSP
06	**Kingdom Under Fire: Circle of Doom** Blueside / XB360
07	**Sonic and the Secret Rings** Sega / Wii
08	**Heroes** Spike / Wii
09	**Samurai Spirits Sen** SNK Playmore / Arcade
10	**Infinite Undiscovery** Microsoft / Xbox 360



Biggest Surprise

Three-Way Tie: Xbox 360 Dominating J-RPGs For 2007 / Xbox 360 To Sell For ¥29,800 Packed-In With Blue Dragon / PS3 Breaks ¥50000 Barrier





Who woulda thunk it? Just as Xbox 360 seems poised for actual, if modest, success in Japan, just about every major non-Square Enix, non-Sony [illegible] Infinite Undiscovery, tri-Crescendo's Trusty Bell/Eternal Sonata, and of course Mistwalker's Blue Dragon, Lost Odyssey and Cry On. The 360 looks to be RPG Central in 2007, and I don't think anyone could have predicted it...nor the fact that Microsoft would bite a *massive* bullet and sell the system packed-in with Blue Dragon for an astounding ¥29800 ($253). The other major surprise of the show came in the form of Ken Kutaragi listlessly announcing a ¥49800 price point for the 20GB PlayStation 3, along with the fact it *will* have an HDMI port. This is clearly put up or shut up time for Sony; with the Xbox going for peanuts and Wii looming, they're going to have to play hardball.

Biggest Question

What In God's Name Is Afrika?

It's been two shows now, and all we know about Sony Japan's Afrika is that it's *really* pretty. But is there a game, or is it just a screensaver? [illegible] about all we can tell you. But hey, check out that high dynamic range [illegible]

Top 5 Least Necessary Games

01	**Railfan** Ongakukan / PlayStation 3
02	**Stock Trading Trainer: Kabutore!** Konami / NDS
03	**Rubik's Cube & Friends That Anyone Can Play** Digital Works Entertainment / Nintendo DS
04	**The Maid Clothes & Machine Gun** D3 Publisher / PS2
05	**Dead Or Alive Xtreme 2** Tecmo / Xbox 360

There were more than 570 games at TGS this year, and the vast majority [illegible] certainly *less* necessary games than these at the show, we present a sampling of legitimate talent wasting their resources on major hardware. First we have Railfan, an FMV (not realtime polygon!) passenger train sim on *PlayStation 3*: Pick up passengers, drop them off, watch the tracks go by. Yeah, work those SPEs! Kojima denies us a Policenauts sequel because he feels the need to educate Japanese housewives about stock trading on DS, while Digital Works produces a version of Rubik's Cube (!!) on DS that "Anyone Can Play". What, manipulating physical plastic cubes is too difficult? Finally, D3 blesses us with the ability to dress up as a French maid and shoot a big gun, while Team Ninja decides a true DOA or Ninja Gaiden sequel is less important than soft porn.

Biggest Disappointment

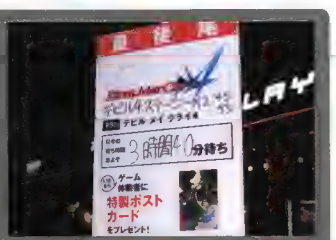
Whither Final Fantasy XIII and Bio Hazard 5?

Yes, I *know* Fabula Nova Crystallis: Final Fantasy XIII was on display at Tokyo Game Show, and we did get our first look at Agito. But Square Enix's tentpole -- the game on which the future of the company rests upon -- gets 15 seconds of new footage added to the four-month-old E3 trailer? That's just not right. Further, Capcom's most significant announced game is a complete no-show, after wowing us last year with a glimpse at Mr. Chris Redfield and a new desert setting.

Longest Line

Devil May Cry 4

The longest wait at the show (though not atypical for high-profile games) was unquestionably Capcom's Devil May Cry 4. Fans wishing to see for themselves how new protagonist Nero differs from suddenly old-hat Dante (Hint: He doesn't) had to wait up to four hours in line for ten minutes of gameplay; our photograph reads 3:40.



Sony Computer Entertainment

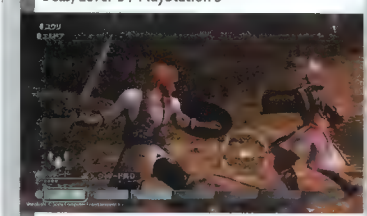
Sony threw down their usual football field-sized booth this year, complete with trademark 300-inch screen running a demo loop of all PlayStation 3 games at the show. It was here we caught our first glimpse of Level-5's (Dragon Quest VIII, Rogue Knight) PlayStation 3 debut, White Knight Story, a stunning-looking consistent-world RPG that already appears to be well into development. The launch and near-launch PlayStation 3 games at the booth, all apparently running on finalized hardware in production cases (six in 1080p!) all looked solid, with a visual sheen generally equivalent to the best-looking Xbox 360 games. Particularly notable was The Eye of Judgment, using next-generation EyeToy technology that tracks physical cards in three dimensions; and unique download-only offering flOw from SCEA, taking place in the microscopic world of sea plankton and controlled entirely with the SIXAXIS tilt-sensing feature. On the PSP front, Sony still shows laudable commitment to the platform despite being utterly and totally beat by DS in Japan. Jeanne D'Arc, again from Level-5, which fantasizes Joan of Arc's story as a tactical RPG, looks especially nice.

What Was Hot

GAMES PICTURED PLUS...

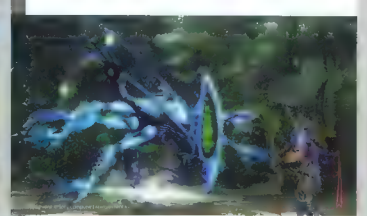
Afrika SCEJ/Rhino Studio / PlayStation 3
Heavenly Sword -SCEE/Ninja Theory / PlayStation 3
Resistance: Fall of Man SCEA/Insomniac Games / PS3
Jeanne D'Arc SCEJ/Level-5 / PSP
Parappa the Rapper SCEJ / PSP
Ape Escape Racer SCEJ / PSP
Kingdom of Paradise 2 SCEJ / PSP
Thinking EXIT Taito / PSP

White Knight Story/Shirokishi Monogatari SCEJ, Level-5 / PlayStation 3



Gran Turismo HD SCEJ, Polyphony Digital / PlayStation 3

The Eye of Judgment SCEJ / PlayStation 3



Warhawk SCEA / PlayStation 3

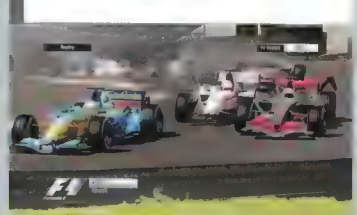
flOw SCEA / PlayStation 3

Genji: Kamui Souran SCEJ, Game Republic / PlayStation 3

Monster Kingdom: Unknown Realms SCEJ, Game Republic / PlayStation 3

Everybody's Golf 5 SCEJ / PlayStation 3

F-1 Championship SCEE / PlayStation 3



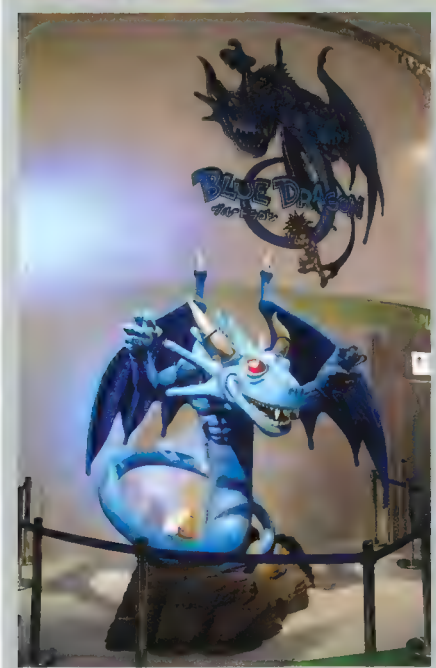
Lair SCEA / PlayStation 3

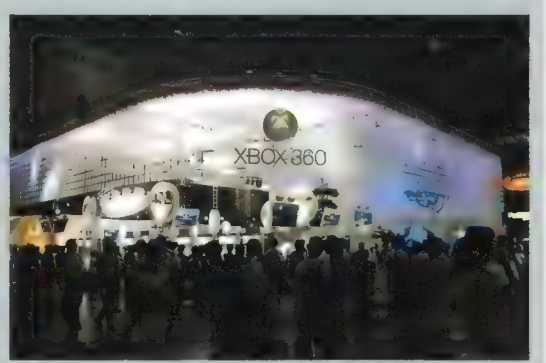
MotorStorm SCEE, Evolution Studios / PlayStation 3

Microsoft

The standouts at the show were obviously the playable demos of Blue Dragon and Lost Odyssey

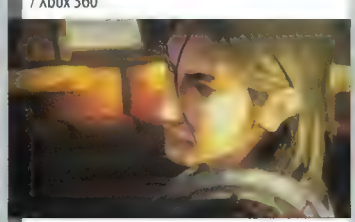
After getting mightily hammered since the Xbox 360 launch last November (only 160,000 machines sold), Microsoft rebounded in admirable fashion, with general post-show sentiment holding that the platform might actually have a fighting chance as a hardcore-gamer niche platform in Japan, perhaps eventually attaining PC-Engine/Mega Drive-level success. The standouts at this show were obviously the playable demos of Blue Dragon and Lost Odyssey, both absolutely gorgeous, if sporting game systems straight outta 1991. But hey -- turn-based, random-encounter RPGs, the Japanese just eat 'em up, and I'll always have a soft spot for them myself. Plenty of other home-grown product was also on display, like D3 Publisher's Oneechanbara vorteX and Earth Defense Force 3 (both expanded versions of the two most popular Simple 2000 PlayStation 2 games), Success's beautifully-designed strategy RPG Operation Darkness, and token Tactics clone Diario from Idea Factory. tri-Ace's (Star Ocean, Valkyrie Profile) newly-revealed Infinite Undiscovery was represented with but a single screenshot, but *man* does it look tasty.





Blue Dragon Microsoft, Mistwalker, Artoon / Xbox 360

Lost Odyssey Microsoft, Mistwalker, Feelplus / Xbox 360

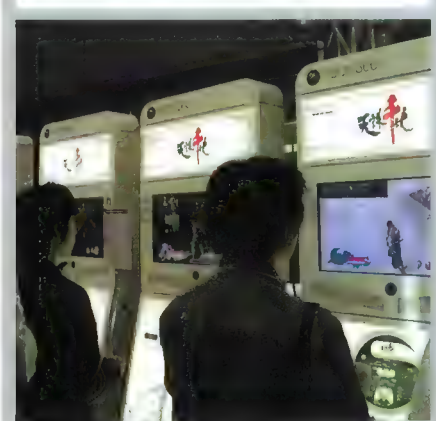


Infinite Undiscovery Microsoft, tri-Ace / Xbox 360

What Was Hot

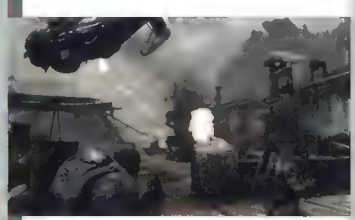
GAMES PICTURED PLUS...

Via Piñata Microsoft, Rare / Xbox 360
Earth Defense Force 3 D3 Publisher / Xbox 360



Kingdom Under Fire: Circle of Doom Microsoft, Blueside / Xbox 360

Gears of War Microsoft, Epic Games / Xbox 360

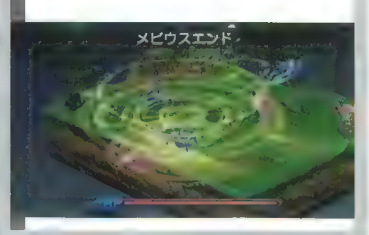


Oneechanbara vorteX D3 Publisher / Xbox 360

Operation Darkness Success / Xbox 360

Vampire Rain AQ Interactive / Xbox 360

Diario Idea Factory / Xbox 360



Capcom

"Lost Planet is our unequivocal choice for Game of Show, looking and playing deliriously fantastic, technically lightyears beyond the already-lovely Dead Rising."

What Capcom lacked in quantity this year was definitely made up in quality. Lost Planet is our unequivocal choice for Game of Show, looking and playing deliriously fantastic, technically lightyears beyond the already-lovely Dead Rising. Devil May Cry 4 was similarly beautiful, if completely cloning the gameplay of DMC3. I'm not complaining, though; when you have a game engine this solid, a sea change in its mechanics would be counter intuitive. The fourth installment of Gyakuten Saiban/Phoenix Wright, everyone's favorite cult legal digital comic dramedy, continues the series in breathlessly quirky fashion -- but with Part II not yet released in America, it'll probably be quite a while before it sees release here. The games were fine indeed, but Capcom's heavily-themed booth, easily the most impressive at the show (gothic church for DMC, courtroom for Phoenix Wright, and pub for Monster Hunter Freedom 2) almost outshone them.

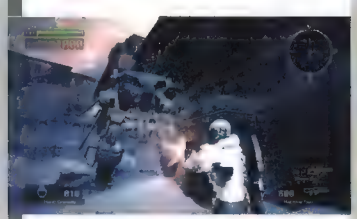
What Was Hot

GAMES PICTURED PLUS...

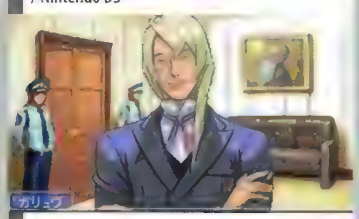
Monster Hunter Portable/Freedom 2 Capcom / PSP

Devil May Cry 4 Capcom / PlayStation 3

Lost Planet Capcom / Xbox 360



Gyakuten Saiban 4/Phoenix Wright 4 Capcom / Nintendo DS



Ryusei no Rockman/Mega Man Star Force Capcom / Nintendo DS

Konami

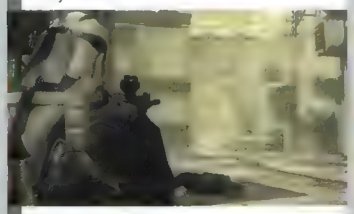
"...the new MGS4 trailer was -- as we can pretty much expect by now -- riveting."

Konami's reliance on Kojima Productions is getting eerie, yo. Fully half of all the games at their booth this year were products of the studio, and I worry both for Hideo Kojima's genius being stretched thin, as well as the unfortunate de-emphasis the company's other stellar teams are receiving. I mean, IGA's Castlevania: PoR wasn't even *playable*. That's not cool. With that said, however, the new MGS4 trailer was -- as we can pretty much expect by now -- riveting. Consisting entirely of gameplay footage, numerous new mechanics were introduced and/or fleshed-out, and *boy howdy* did the final, famous Kojima "sting" at the end get tongues wagging (if you haven't been on the internet for a month, it's a glimpse of a young Snake). I maintain this is simply Old Snake having fun with his new Octocam suit, projecting a younger vision of himself, but with Kojima, you never know. Portable Ops looked similarly juicy, offering a main-continuity, true Metal Gear experience on PSP, with a youthful Colonel Roy Campbell and a mysterious new ninja character known as Null (resembling nobody so much as a young Grey Fox) shown for the first time. It's not all The Kojima Show, however; FPS Coded Arms Assault on PS3 was pretty if very early, and Elebits looks like it could be...interesting.

What Was Hot

GAMES PICTURED...

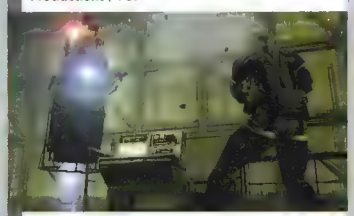
Metal Gear Solid 4 Konami, Kojima Productions / PlayStation 3



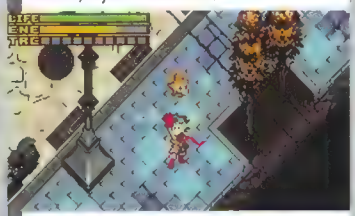
Coded Arms Assault Konami / PlayStation 3

Elebits Konami / Wii

Metal Gear Solid Portable Ops Konami, Kojima Productions / PSP



Boktai: Django & Sabata/Lunar Knights Konami, Kojima Productions / Nintendo DS



Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin Konami / Nintendo DS

Sega

"[Virtua Fighter 5] is arcade-perfect in every conceivable way..."

Well, it's all about Virtua Fighter 5, innit? The first home installment of the series to use the exact same, unexpurgated models and textures from the arcade version, and reportedly ported to PlayStation 3 in just four weeks (likely a result of both the PS3 and arcade board Lindbergh sporting GeForce 7-derived hardware), is arcade-perfect in every conceivable way. All Sega has to do now is add its various home version-exclusive features, and one of the most important launch-window PS3 titles in Japan is signed, sealed, delivered. Sonic on both PS3 and 360 seems unchanged from its E3 incarnation, though Secret Rings on Wii seems like genuine fun, having come a long way since its Los Angeles debut as Sonic Wildfire. If only we could have played it. On the current (or is it last, already?)-gen tip, Sega offers up a quickie sequel to Yakuza, using the exact same engine as the first, set in Osaka, and Shining Force EXA, looking solid and definitely better than the mediocre Neo.

Ryu Ga Gotoku/Yakuza 2 Sega / PlayStation 2

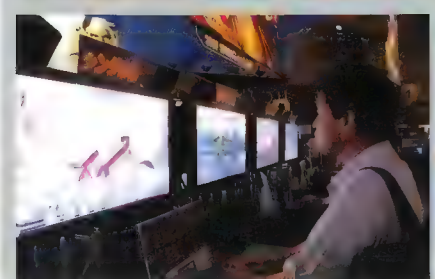
What Was Hot

GAMES PICTURED...

Virtua Fighter 5 Sega / PlayStation 3

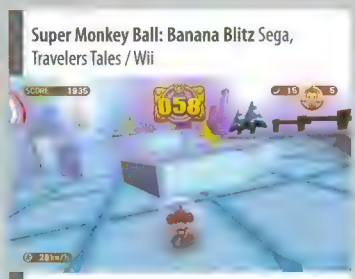
Sonic The Hedgehog Sega, Sonic Team / PlayStation 3, Xbox 360

Armored Core 4 From Software / PlayStation 3



Sonic & The Secret Rings Sega / Wii

Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz Sega, Travelers Tales / Wii



Shining Force EXA Sega / PlayStation 2

Square Enix

"Crisis Core wasn't playable after some two years in development, and [illegible] to show any significant new footage of FFXIII is simply baffling."

Whoa. Square Enix is officially *making love* to the Nintendo DS. As it stands, they'll have at least *eight* games for the platform in stores within a six-month or so window. Luckily, they all look sweet and syrupy: DQM Joker sports the best 3-D the DS has ever seen, Tetsuya Nomura's latest vanity project, "Street RPG" Subarashiki Kono Sekai looks genuinely interesting with dual control of two characters on each screen simultaneously, and the still very-early-in-development Revenant Wings: FFXII came as something of a shock. The ending of the PS2 original doesn't exactly seem to lead in to a sequel, and yet that's exactly what Revenant is: A direct sequel to FFXII, starring Vaan and Penelo. Perhaps even more surprising was the full 3-D, full voice remake of the GBA's Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories on PS2, to be handled by the Musashiden team. All well and good, but I'm miffed that Crisis Core wasn't playable after some two years in development, and the choice not to show any significant new footage of FFXIII is simply baffling.

Fabula Nova Crystallis: Final Fantasy XIII

What Was Hot

GAMES PICTURED PLUS...

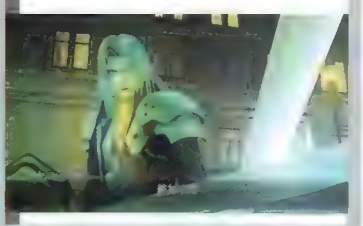
Heroes of Mana Square / Nintendo DS
Front Mission 1st Square / Nintendo DS
Final Fantasy VII Advent Children Complete Square / Blu-ray Disc (Movie)

Fabula Nova Crystallis: Final Fantasy XIII Square / Various

Seiken Densetsu 4/Dawn of Mana Square / Various

Kingdom Hearts II Final Mix/Kingdom Hearts Re:Chain of Memories Square / PS2

Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII Square / PSP

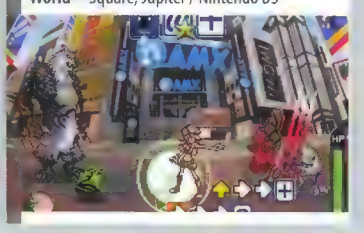


Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings Square / Nintendo DS

Dragon Quest Monsters Joker Enix / Nintendo DS

Chocobo & The Magic Picturebook Square / Nintendo DS

Subarashiki Kono Sekai: It's A Wonderful World -- Square, Jupiter / Nintendo DS



Bandai Namco

"Of special note to both Play Japan editors, being manic fans of the manga, was Jojo's Bizarre Adventure, based on chapter 1 of the comic and looking *di molto* good."

Bandai Namco's standout game this year is unquestionably the delightful Xbox 360 RPG Eternal Sonata, by tri-Crescendo of Baten Kaitos fame. It's arguably more interesting than either Blue Dragon or Lost Odyssey, with vibrant stylized visuals and a fun, semi-realtime combat system. Ridge Racer 7 was predictably slick, running in 1080p at 60fps, exuding the series's trademark "real unreality", and both 360 and PS3 Gundams look sufficiently next-gen. Of special note to both Play Japan editors, being manic fans of the manga, was Jojo's Bizarre Adventure, based on chapter 1 of the comic and looking *di molto* good. On the handheld front, Bandai Namco continues to be one of the few third parties truly committed to PSP development, with Ace Combat X, the Tales series "all stars" game Radiant Mythology, and Gundam Battle Royale.

What Was Hot

GAMES PICTURED PLUS...

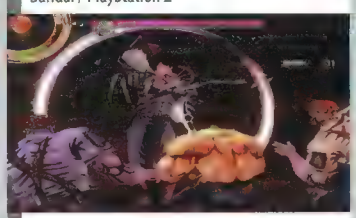
Mobile Suit Gundam: Operation Troy Bandai / Xbox 360
Tales of the World: Radiant Mythology Namco / PSP
Gundam Battle Royale Bandai / PSP

Ridge Racer 7 Namco / PlayStation 3

Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire Bandai / PlayStation 3

Culdcept Saga Omiya Soft / Xbox 360

Jojo's Bizarre Adventure: Phantom Blood Bandai / PlayStation 2



Ace Combat X: Skies of Deception Namco / PSP

Trusty Bell/Eternal Sonata Namco, tri-Crescendo / Xbox 360

Tecmo

"Team Ninja redeems itself with a grounds-up remake of Ninja Gaiden Xbox on PlayStation 3, fully re-modeled and -textured, with new areas, weapons, bosses and the ability to play as buxom battleaxe-wielding Rachel."

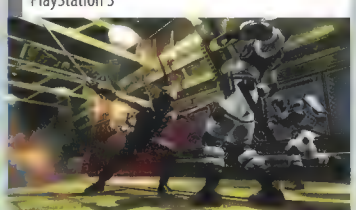
Pointless soft porn *no*, Ninja Gaiden Sigma *yes*. Look, the Dead Or Alive girls are hot. We know this. But you know what? There's a fine selection of quality Dead Or Alive dojinshi out there, making the comparatively tame Xtreme series moot. It's okay, though, because Team Ninja redeems itself with a grounds-up remake of Ninja Gaiden Xbox on PlayStation 3, fully re-modeled and -textured, with new areas, weapons, bosses and the ability to play as buxom battleaxe-wielding Rachel. Cronos, however, still remains a mystery. Tecmo's other offerings included the derivative-looking golf game Pangya on Wii, and the sequel to last year's well-received Tokobot on PlayStation 2, Korobot Adventure.

What Was Hot

GAMES PICTURED...

Swing Golf Pangya Tecmo, Ntreev Soft / Wii

Ninja Gaiden Sigma Tecmo, Team Ninja / PlayStation 3



Dead Or Alive Xtreme 2 Tecmo, Team Ninja / Xbox 360

Korobot Adventure Tecmo / PlayStation 2

SNK Playmore

"...Literally, the big news: One hundred percent re-drawn from scratch 2-D King of Fighters XII."

SNK may very well be *back*. A trio of new arcade projects were announced, from least to most exciting: KOF Maximum Impact Regulation "A", a version of the Maximum Impact series with Ash Crimson for arcade; Samurai Spirits Sen, a fully polygonal, all-new Samurai game; and finally, the big news: *One hundred percent re-drawn from scratch 2-D King of Fighters XII.* Yes, I felt the need to italicize that entire sentence, and for good reason -- the 12-year-old sprites from the Neo•Geo era are finally being thrown out. 'Tis a wondrous day. Metal Slug Complete, collecting the entire series (even X!) on PSP was looking tight, and the DS revival of the most well-loved and popular Neo•Geo Pocket series of all time, SNK VS. Capcom Card Fighters, should prove to be a blast.

SNK VS. Capcom Card Fighters DS SNK Playmore / Nintendo DS

Metal Slug Complete SNK Playmore / PSP

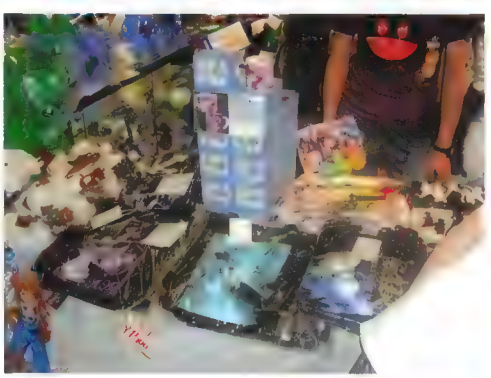
What Was Hot

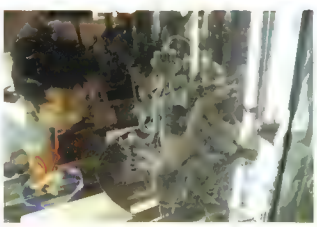
GAMES PICTURED PLUS...

Samurai Spirits Sen SNK Playmore / Arcade
King of Fighters XII SNK Playmore / Arcade
King of Fighters Maximum Impact Regulation "A" SNK Playmore / Arcade

SWAG @ TGS 2006

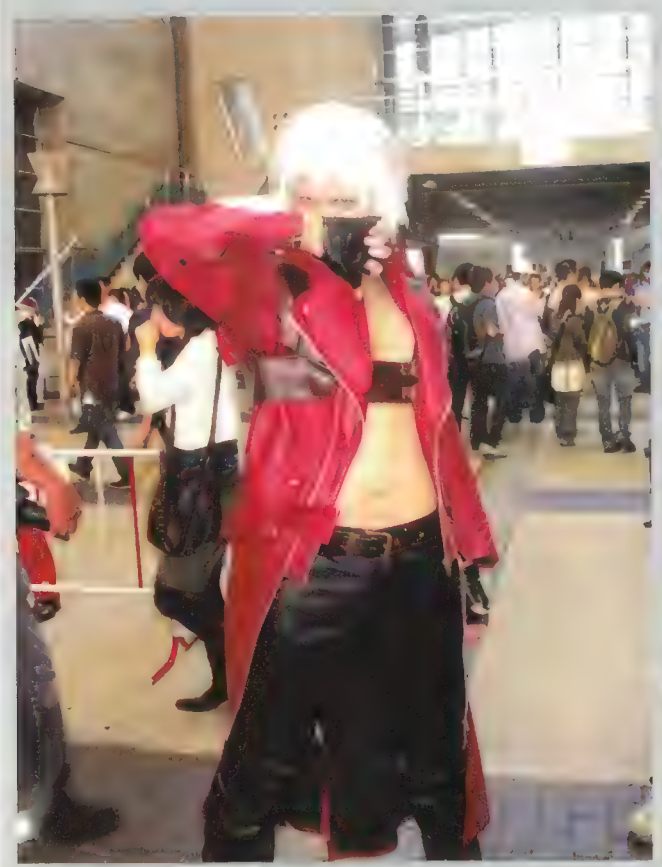
"Swag" at TGS takes a slightly different form than at most video game shows, because you gotta pay for it. Most major third-parties have separate booths set up for the express purpose of selling licensed game goods, ranging from music CDs, to apparel, to *dakimakura* "hugging pillows" (ahem), to plush toys, to exclusive limited figures and statues. Enjoy this gallery of trinkets you shall likely never get your hands on.





COSPLAY @ TGS 2006

What Japanese gaming event would be complete without the requisite Cosplay contingent? As usual, Tetsuya Nomura-designed characters make up approximately 70% of the costumes on display, but there's plenty of diamonds in the rough, as can be seen below. I'm especially diggin' the Final Fantasy XIII heroine, and quintet of FFXII Frans. Woof!



▲ Dante, Devil May Cry 3

▲ Devil Kings posse

Sora & Kairi, Kingdom Hearts II ▶

◀ Heroine, Final Fantasy XIII & Kika, Suikoden IV

System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Bandai Namco Games	Available	Oct. 24
Developer	CyberConnect 2	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	Teen

.hack//

G.U. vol. 1//Rebirth

Login initiated__your Haseo awaits

words **Dave Halverson**

There are a lot of RPGs out there for the PS2, in fact, it's safe to say that the last couple of years have been among the richest ever for the genre, but there are none quite like .hack//G.U. What started as a novel idea for a simulated MMORPG tied to an anime series has blossomed into one of role-playing's most beloved series, if for no other reason than its individuality. But there is so much more to love with G.U. The jump from the initial series to the current series is on par with many a next-generation overhaul. CyberConnect2 has righted every wrong, completely redesigning the look of the game, and adding functionality where frustration once took hold.

The World's coma engine is alive and well as the second series gets underway, but user Haseo is on the case, delving deep into the underbelly of The World, working with the system's stewards and the friends he meets along the way to unravel what's gone askew, as the player-killer-killer Tri-Edge continues to grow beyond the parameters of the system. Able to use Data Drain and bearing a character design not found in the code, he is the ghost in the system and Haseo will have to go to great lengths corralling this ferocious white rabbit. I've written in depth on the game's battle engine, dungeons, and user interface so I will simply reinstate here that they are all of the utmost quality, coupled with among the best character design this side of Square-Enix's domain, and most importantly a gripping story that grabs a hold of you early on and just squeezes tighter and tighter as the massive first volume unravels. .hack// G.U. is an action-RPG gamer's dream-come-true, encapsulating superb action, beautiful character and world design, excellent pacing and a compelling story all wrapped in a massive cyber-adventure.

It's time to dive back in if you're already a citizen, and if you're not, gain access to the gaming world's most compelling simulated cyber space. **play**

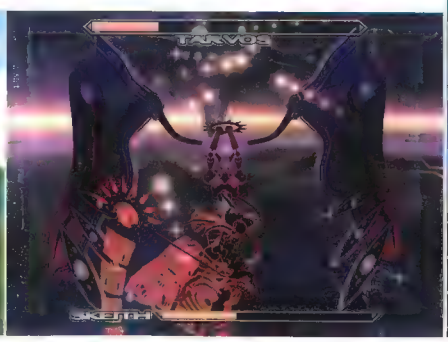
> "CyberConnect2 has righted every wrong, completely redesigning the look of the game, and adding functionality where frustration once took hold."

.hack// G.U. vol. 1//Rebirth

score **9.0**

+	Interface and overall structure vastly improved; superb character design, soundtrack and especially story
-	It's a bit of a slow burn the first 10 hours or so and I have to admit I'd like to see the series jump to PS3 from here as beautiful as it is

Character design doesn't get much better than this...



System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Namco-Bandai	Available	October
Developer	Namco Tales Studio	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	RP

Tales of the Abyss

A tale worth telling

words **Casey Loe**

This has been a great year for RPGs, as last year's trickle has steadily grown into a deluge. I don't think a month of 2006 has gone by without a solid PS2 RPG release, and publishers are packing October and November with great titles to clear their slates before the PS3 and Wii hit. The downside of this unprecedented RPG windfall is that great games are sure to fall through the cracks, and Tales of the Abyss is the one I fear for most. I'm not going to say it's a better game than FFXII (although a part of me wants to), but I will say this: if you pluck one *other* RPG off the rack this year, this little gem should be it.

Tales of the Abyss is not exactly an all-around masterpiece. The game's environments are generally pretty, but the battles look bland and the world map is hideous. The loading times are often longer than the battles themselves, and the game's elaborate menu system is a mess. The music is generally good, but I'm getting a little of sick of Motoi Sakuraba at this point—he scores every third RPG and his style barely varies from series to series; I should not be having Baten Kaitos, Star Ocean and Valkyrie Profile flashbacks as I play a Tales game. Go Shiina did a much better job with the soundtrack to last year's otherwise inferior Tales of Legendia.

I could go on listing flaws, but Tales of the Abyss gets everything right that really matters. Take the battle system—there are a few cool new twists, but the Abyss team has wisely decided to cease tinkering and incorporate every mechanic that has worked in past titles. Inexperienced players can set the game to semi-auto and button-mash their way through, but the new Field of Fonon system and the return of Hi-Ougis, free movement and defensive skills provide plenty of depth for experts to plumb. After years of experimentation, the battles are just about perfect at this point.

"If you pluck one other RPG off the rack this year, this little gem should be it."

But it isn't the battle system that kept me playing until the wee hours of the morning. With a well fleshed-out world, an intricate storyline and six strong characters that bicker more than any party in RPG history, Tales is as rich in story and character as a full season of a good anime series. The English language voice cast does an exceptional job, and the script gives the actors plenty of meat to work with. The game's lengthy quest features hundreds of event scenes, and they're so consistently fast-paced and humorous that they'll charm even the most virulent of cut scene-haters. Unfortunately, Namdai couldn't afford to extend that level of quality to the game's many hundreds of optional skit scenes, so whenever you tap the Select button to get a little deeper into TotA's world, you'll be forced to watch heads lip-sync to nothing as text scrolls at painfully slow speeds. Even the music is muted for no reason—they might as well have just inserted a big flashing graphic that says "WE WERE TOO CHEAP TO VOICE THIS!" I can understand the need to cut costs, but by keeping the skits timed to a nonexistent voice track they've made them basically unwatchable. It's no problem to skip them, but it breaks my heart a little bit to do so.

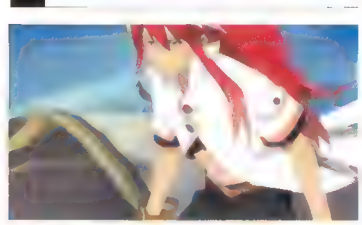
Despite its flaws, Tales of the Abyss has commandeered my PlayStation 2 with its engrossing tale and consistently entertaining battles, leaving a half-dozen unfinished games to gather dust beside it. Don't miss this one! **play**

Tales of the Abyss

Score **9.0**

\+ Great story, battles, and voice work

\- Uneven graphics, ruined skits



A Masterpiece Remastered!

For Game Boy Advance

FINAL FANTASY V ADVANCE

An epic story...

Under the benevolent auspices of the elemental crystals -- Wind, Water, Fire and Earth -- mankind enjoyed a golden age of unparalleled harmony.

One day, the winds mysteriously cease to blow. Concerned, the king of Tycoon (a prosperous land charged with guarding the wind crystal) flies on the back of his dragon to the holy sanctuary. There, he witnesses the unimaginable: The wind crystal, protector of life from time immemorial, shatters before his very eyes.

Meanwhile, a young adventurer named Bartz, resting with his trusty chocobo steed, Boko, in a forest near Tycoon, is startled when a giant meteor crashes nearby. Heading towards the crash site, he saves the life of a young woman named

An unforgettable cast...

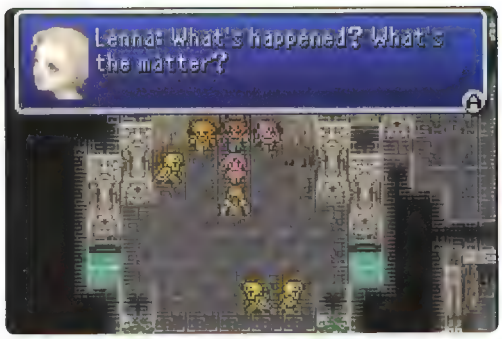
Bartz Klauser

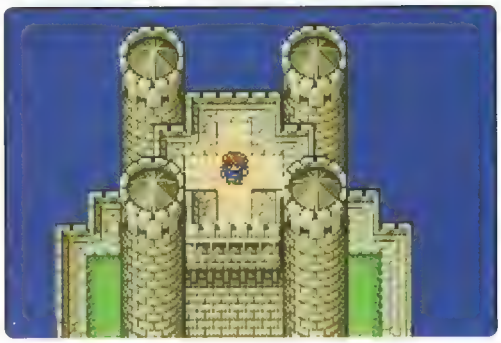
Young and idealistic, Bartz is the quintessential adventurer. Wandering from town to town with his intelligent chocobo steed Boko, Bartz is a true lone wolf, connected to no-one. Initially reluctant to help Lenna and have others depend on him, Bartz will come to learn the meaning of friendship, and the truth about his own mysterious lineage.

Lenna, who explains that she was on her way to the Wind Shrine to check up on her father. The two make their way to the wreckage of the meteor, where they find an old man stricken with amnesia, unable to recall anything but his name: Galuf. With the aid of the pirate captain Faris, Bartz and company eventually reach the Wind Shrine, only to find the crystal chamber littered with shards of the broken crystal and king Tycoon nowhere to be found.

Through a vision of the lost king, the shards speak to the foursome: United by fate, they are entrusted with the crystal's power so they may save the remaining crystals--and the world. Only Bartz, Lenna, Galuf and Faris can stop the destruction before it is too late.

For evil only sleeps, it does not fade away...



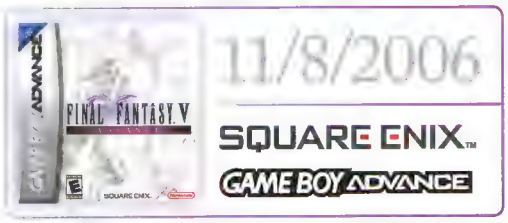


A journey like no other...

FINAL FANTASY V Advance represents the final evolution of the job change system, first introduced in Final Fantasy III. Taking command of 26 total jobs, both series mainstays like knight, monk and red mage, and four all-new jobs exclusive to the Game Boy Advance -- gladiator, cannoneer, oracle and necromancer -- players have an unparalleled level of freedom. Unlike recent games in the series, parties can be tailored exactly as the player sees fit. Will you go the traditional route of a balanced party, with equal helpings of warrior and mage? Or will you try for more unorthodox combinations, such as an all-wizard team? The choice is yours, and it's safe to say that no two people will play FINAL FANTASY V Advance exactly alike.

"Unlike recent games in the series, parties can be tailored exactly as the player sees fit."

Couple this with a lengthy, world-spanning quest navigated via chocobo, ship, airship and dragon, and exclusive Game Boy Advance features such as an optional super dungeon and music jukebox, and the choice is clear: It's time to relive the adventure many consider the gameplay high point of the legendary series -- or experience it for the very first time -- right in the palm of your hand.



Lenna Charlotte Tycoon

Lenna is the teenaged princess of Tycoon, the country charged with protecting the wind crystal. Beautiful and kind, yet somewhat naïve, Lenna wants nothing more than to discover the mystery of her lost father. She displays a close affinity for dragons, and an almost maternal instinct when it comes to protecting those she perceives as weaker than herself.

Galuf Doe

An old man stricken with amnesia, Galuf is an enigma. Something about his skill with swords and noble bearing suggests a man of high birth, though this often seems to be at odds with his raucous and lighthearted behavior. Having nothing but a vague need to go to the Wind Shrine, he decides to accompany Princess Lenna, both out of concern for the young girl and in the hopes that something along the way might jog his memory.

Faris Scherwiz

Bold and headstrong, Captain Faris commands a pirate crew aboard a curious ship that requires no wind to sail. Despite a young age, Faris is very worldly, yet always ready to help fellow Warriors out...with a little prodding. A pirate virtually since birth, this character can often display a selfish streak, though there is a secret that might threaten Faris' position of leadership should it ever be revealed.

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ADVERTORIAL

Final Fantasy XII

I can't put the controller down. Final Fantasy XII a ten.

by Hamilton Campbell

System(s)	PS2	Publisher	Square Enix	Available	November
Developer	Square Enix	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	T

I may never beat Final Fantasy XII. I can't bring myself to do it. I've fallen in love with this game, completely, and don't want the relationship to end. It would break my heart to know that it was over, finally. I'd rather spend thirty more minutes not knowing how it concludes than ever draw my sword against the final boss.

If pixels had gravity, then FFXII would be the dense center of RPG universe. Every corner of this game pulls you towards it; the title is so complete, so lush and rewarding, I nearly tumbled over myself and fell through my screen. Maybe I did; never have I lived in a game such as this one. With more than 100 hours of quest, subquest, sub-dungeon, sub-story available, it's easy to spend more of your waking hours in Ivalice than on Earth.

So much has already been said about this masterpiece that it's hard to know where to begin. Famitsu, the Japanese magazine known for its stingy scoring, has granted FFXII a 40/40; this is only the sixth time in the history of the rag that any game has been given such an honor. Play magazine has also only given four tens in its history, so it is with nervous, deep-set trepidation that I tread towards the final score.

It's not that I'm afraid of giving Final Fantasy XII a ten. It's just overwhelming to have played perfection. And that's what this game is; extraordinary to the point of awe. I'm confused by how good it is. I can think of nothing to change, no complaint to level. The world design, the costume design, the character design, and the gameplay design all coalesce into something flawless.

I've put so many hours into it, but I'm an obsessive-compulsive RPG player. I have to investigate every edge of the world, stare at every NPC, ingest every detail of a dusty archway, a sunsoaked tile floor, a chattering moogle. And FF12 has been delayed for two years, developed for four, which means that every detail is detailed. There are no cut corners in this game, and exploring it with any passion is like walking into an antique store filled with every relic a civilization ever produced.

Now, Final Fantasy XII comes at the end of the PS2's life. With all of the

"So much has already been said about this masterpiece that it's hard to know where to begin."

"For the first time in my life of gaming, I really feel like I've gone on an adventure."

roaring hype about next gen systems, I feel almost maternal worry that the game will be overlooked. I'm concerned Final Fantasy has become passé. The age of RPGs came and went in the mid-late-nineties; how can we drum up support for a game so delayed, postponed, so oft rumored problematic?

The best I can do is tell you how this game makes me feel, and hope that it affects you in the same way.

Final Fantasy XII is the first mature game I've ever played. Whether it be the wisdom of its story, language, or of actual gameplay, it's hard to imagine playing another RPG after this. It's long, and it's fast. Taking elements of MMO design and incorporating them into an offline experience, FFXII streamlines the cluttered, turn-based battles of former FF titles. RPGs are great because of their stories, and FFXII panthers from moment to moment relentlessly.

Using a system of "Gambits," players pre-program basic AI routines for the party, and then steer the group into battle. It's essentially pre-committing to how you've always behaved in Final Fantasy games. Instead of waiting for a character's HP to drop to half, you tell a party member, "If this happens, cast Cure." It's what you would have done anyway, and if Final Fantasy XII can be guilty of anything, it's making us conscious of how repetitive Active Time Battling really was.

Unlocking your abilities takes place via the License Board. Each character receives License Points from fighting, and then these points are spent on this essentially updated Sphere Grid. The freedom is a little disorienting; any character can become a White Mage, a Thief, a Warrior. With so much time to spend in the game, every character can become a master of everything.

But what are you spending time doing? There's the obvious (yet subtly delivered) main story, but one can also engage Clan Hunts — the main sidequest of FFXII. By checking Clan boards throughout the world, you can unlock and engage a specific creature. Essentially a system of Notorious Monsters (another idea cribbed from the world of MMOs), this is the first Final Fantasy mini-game that is right there, in the world, with you. You don't have to play cards, or race chocobos, or stop playing the actual plot. Running into a Hunt target can happen as you go about engaging the major quests of the game. In this way, the Clan system feels more deeply integrated into the story than any other mini-game before.

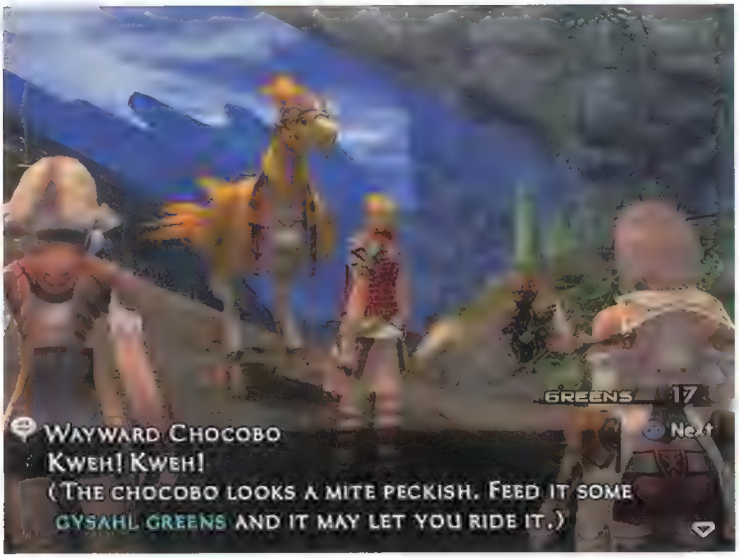
I don't even know how to encapsulate the experience of FFXII into two pages. The title is so grand, so erudite, that I feel illiterate by comparison. It is so much greater than I. For the first time in my life of gaming, I really feel like I've gone on an adventure.

And I'll add this: I'm embarrassed to love other Final Fantasy games. They seem so childish now, the plotlines straightforward and sophomoric. How can I invoke an unsoiled memory of Squall or Cloud when Basch is a thousand times the man they were? What Time Kompression or Midgar Plate or Sin can hold a candle to the narrative restraint of the story of Dalmasca? What other Final Fantasy game has begged, "Don't finish me yet; I don't want you to leave."

For now, I'll simply head back into Ivalice, and spend a few more hours trying to take in every detail of every shop, stall, texture and sound. I'll try and read every word of text written for the game; I'll devour every last piece of Yasumi Matsuno's masterpiece. It's the least I can do in the face of a game so great. **play**

Final Fantasy XII

score 10


GREENS 17
Next
WAYWARD CHOCOBO
KWEH! KWEH!
(THE CHOCOBO LOOKS A MITE PECKISH. FEED IT SOME GYSAHL GREENS AND IT MAY LET YOU RIDE IT.)

System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Tecmo	Available	October 2006
Developer	Tecmo	Online/Multi	1	ESRB Rating	E

Tokobot Plus
Mysteries of the Karakuri

words [redacted]

What young lad wouldn't love to have an army of robots under his command? That's exactly what plucky treasure hunter Bolt has at his disposal, thanks to discovering the Tokobots, a group of strange little robots that have a mysterious connection to an ancient civilization. Bolt simply wants to prove his worth to the research lab he works for, but fate has other plans for the boy, as he soon finds himself in the middle of a sinister plot to control the world via long lost technology.

When Tokobot first hit the PSP, it stood proud as a refreshingly original title, something said hardware was in need of at the time. The basic premise was old-school platforming, but the various ways in which Bolt could make use of his robot pals added that extra level of personality and gameplay that makes a good game great. Commands can be given to the Karakuri (the name by which the Tokobots were originally known), and the various actions they can perform via those commands are what helps you, and Bolt, overcome the game's many obstacles. At first, these abilities start off simple: linking together to form a ladder for Bolt to climb up, or swinging around to knock over an oncoming enemy, for example. As you progress deeper into the game, Bolt will uncover additional upgrades for his Tokobots, such as the ability to join them together to form a variety of machines and weapons.

Tokobots alone won't get you through this game, however; your skills will be tested as you make precision jumps, find an enemy's weakness, or figure out how in the world to get to that door that you know you have to get to. You'll fail, and you'll die–a lot–but as a wise (fictional) man once said, we fall so that we can learn to pick ourselves back up. Progress is never just handed to you, so when you do things just right and finally get past that particularly tricky area, you'll feel like you've actually accomplished something afterward.

"What young lad wouldn't want to have an army of robots under his command?"

Though most of the game's difficulty is wonderfully balanced, boss battles are creative, enjoyable, yet heartbreakingly easy, while the random "lock you in a room with a slew of common monsters" challenges are difficult, frustrating, and far more pain than fun.

For its grand re-introduction on the PS2, Tecmo has gone back and either tweaked or added to nearly all of the game's elements. Probably the biggest changes are to the camera and controls, both of which have received welcome modifications. The new method for commanding your Tokobots to perform their Joint Actions is top notch, but the camera system, while much improved, still has its problems. Among the other additions, new areas have been scattered throughout the game, offering extra challenges and treasures to be won, the story-line has been fleshed out and backed by full voice acting, and stages can now be replayed and run through in time attack without the need for beating the game first. What this means is a better, more developed version of an already great game for those new to Tokobot, and another reason to play through the game for longtime fans. **play**

Tokobot Plus: Mysteries of the Karakuri — score 9.0

\+ Easy to pick up, hard to put down

– Boss fights too [redacted]

System(s)	PC, GC, PS2, Xbox	Publisher	THQ	Available	October
Developer	THQ Australia Studios	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	E 10+

Avatar
The Last Airbender

Aang and company grab some big air in their game debut

Dave Halverson

It's obvious from the get-go that Avatar's designed explicitly to serve its youth demographic. It's a prime example of the modern brand-endemic video game, focus-tested to death and then some. Whether you hold that against it or not is an individual decision. If you cringe at the thought of replaying areas or facing indecision of any kind, and/or are an Avatar fan—well, then this game is for you. It is impossible to get lost in Avatar or not know exactly what to do. You get a journal complete with an onscreen icon which can only be cleared by accessing it, a big green arrow pointing the way to each and every quest no matter how significant, and saves literally every 3-5 minutes (that take seconds on Xbox but slow things down on PS2). There is no guess work involved. There is however a massive top-down action/RPG to be had that takes a while to build steam (the scope of the game doesn't come into view until you reach the city of Omashu where King Bumi will more than entertain you) but is hard to put down once you get into the depths of the adventure.

For those new to the series, the "Avatar" is a mischievous 12-year-old boy named Aang, defrosted by siblings Katara and Sokka 100 years after the old Avatar disappeared, leaving the nations of Fire, Earth, Water, and Air vulnerable to the Fire Nation, whose path of destruction can only be stopped by the Avatar. You can figure out the rest.

Simply put the game is a massive quest-based adventure that sends Aang and party on mission after mission, via a laundry list of errands (boosting precious EXP) placed within each overall event integral to progressing the story. Connected by a vast network of lands awash with arteries, the action consists of running and fighting, using steadily entertaining bouts of stealth, and defeating bosses...but there's a lot of meat on these bones.

For one thing—and I'm so happy to see this—the party members all appear together, rather than blending into one body only to disperse for each battle (there's a sequence when you rescue a bear and even it travels with you) providing a real sense of the camaraderie. There is also a lot to do in terms of trade, item management, leveling up moves—divided between offensive, defensive, and distraction—and an array of character-endemic Focus events where a spherical grid is used to summon powers to find buried treasure, heal, solve topographical obstacles and so forth. Momo and Appa get into the act too.

> "For one thing—and I'm so happy to see this—the party members all appear together"

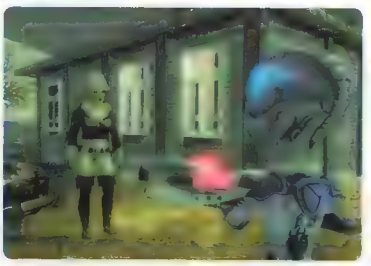
Visually, while not exactly arresting, the terrain is vivid and displays nice detail, the cel-shading is exceptional, and the in-game cinemas are as attractive as they are well acted. The animation is nimble too—characters are rubbery and light of foot—although battles tend to lack crisp collision, and, unfortunately, no jumping. But hey, who's complaining right? Anime and animation-based games are 99% fighting. I'm just happy to see someone make a real go of it. **play**

Avatar: the Last Ai... score 7.5

System(s)	PlayStation 2, Xbox	Publisher	THQ	Available	October
Developer	Pandemic	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	T

Destroy All Humans! 2
Make War Not Love

Feel Like Making War...



words **Greg Orlando**

As Destroy All Humans! 2: Make War Not Love's title suggests, you won't be giving the various shaven apes here any presents unless, of course, it's the searing kiss of a disintegrator blast or the liberating touch of the anal probe. As the alien Cryptosporidium-138 and his various clones, it's your job to fry the hippies, blow up the buildings, and make mischief in a 1960s setting. Take that, Age of Aquarius.

Love picks up some 10 years after the events of Destroy All Humans!, with the vile Soviets attempting to take over the world. The protagonist Crypto begins in a faux San Francisco—called Bay City—targeted by the Reds for a hostile takeover via a strange, new drug. Missions have the snarky alien (who sounds remarkably like a nearly talented Jack Nicholson impersonator) hunting down the makers of Revelade, both on foot and in a flying saucer.

There's a great sense of mayhem and chaos here, with Crypto able to wreak havoc on both his surroundings and the general populace with his mental abilities, as well as a set of extraterrestrial weapons. It's possible to possess humans, scan their brains for information, hit them with pure waves of free love, toss around bodies and inanimate objects with telekinesis, and transmogrify junk in order to create ammunition for alien weaponry.

While flying, Crypto can abduct humans to feed into a genetic gene blender to enhance his abilities, engage a cloaking device to fly around undetected, and use gravity beams and death rays to tear up air- and ground-based targets. He is, in short, a diminutive arsenal, a wrecking ball with bug eyes.

The sheer breadth and scope of Crypto's destructive capabilities allow for extended sequences of freeform violence and mayhem. The game succeeds thoroughly when it puts its protagonist on a destructive path, asking the alien to tear through humanity in the manner of a chainsaw through human flesh. The game finds its rhythm when Crypto's made to soar through the skies in his spaceship, blasting endless tanks in an all-out defense of Bay City's Coit Tower, and during a romp through England's streets where alien and Soviet Spy slaughter KGB men aplenty.

> "Flower power takes it on the chin here..."

Wondrous cathartic violence is supplemented with humor that's more funny than genuinely wince inducing. At times, Crypto will interrupt someone's long-winded commentary to note that right at this moment, the player is in the kitchen making nachos. When a villain, in his death throes, begins monologuing, Crypto will be there to plant his gun on the ground and lean sleepily on it.

Unfortunately, the game embraces some poor design choices. Multi-part missions are potholed by the lack of checkpoints, meaning that if Crypto gets killed, he has to start over from the beginning. This is problematic because Love has no compunctions about presenting you with an extended run-and-gun sequence, followed by an escort mission where it's necessary to take to the skies to clear a path for a woman in a car—a woman who is incapable of driving around obstacles on a partially blocked street.

Flower power takes it on the chin here, and Love is agreeable enough to put it down for the count. And the mayhem here should be enough until Crypto turns his guns on bell-bottoms, disco, and Jimmy Carter. Watch the skies. **play**

Destroy All Humans! 2 Make War Not Love — score **8.0**

+	Emphasis on cathartic, amoral destruction; game has a good sense of humor
–	Poor game design; horrible escort missions

Dragon Ball Z: Budokai Tenkaichi 2

score 8.0

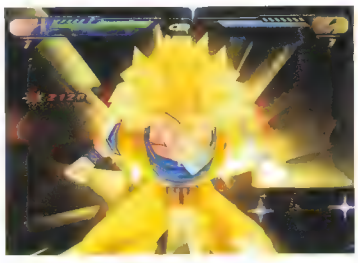
Come get some

PlayStation 2
Spike
Atari/Namco Bandai

1
November 7
Teen

Dragon Ball Z: Budokai Tenkaichi 2 is the type of game that will only give you back what you're willing to put into it. Until you've spent some quality time with the game's training mode, the fighting engine will seem shallow and/or confusing, and your A.I.-controlled opponents will pummel you with such ease that you'll question if your controller is actually plugged in. Put in some real effort, however, and you'll be duly rewarded.

I'm reminded here of the good old days with Asuka 120% on the Saturn: it wasn't fancy, it wasn't overly technical, what it was was a chance for you and a friend to "bang" (as we say around these parts) in crazy, back and forth, non-stop matches of epic proportion. In fact, if you get two people who really know what they're doing, as the characters brawl, teleport around, fire off a "kamehameha" or two, and send each other flying into the distant landscape, you'll swear that you're watching a scene straight from the TV show. Don't let that fool you, though; while you may think otherwise, this is a fighting game that all can enjoy, not just those who live and breathe the adventures of Goku and pals. **Eric Patterson**



"I'm reminded here of the good old days with Asuka 120% on the Saturn..."

God Hand

score 8.5

Power of the divine

PlayStation 2
Clover Studios
Capcom

NA
October 10
Mature

Pipe, meet face.

Remember Streets of Rage? Remember Battletoads and Double Dragon? Remember hanging out with your buddies and trading off controllers, eating chips, and pressing pause on your NES until after dinner? God Hand is gonna bring it all back. Under the guidance of Shinji Mikami (Resident Evil, Devil May Cry, Viewtiful Joe), Clover Studios has developed a brawler so rich with homage that it feels like Tarantino. This is the game we've been waiting for. It's an over-the top beat 'em up; it's The Bouncer with some balls.

Do you care about the story? Well, here it is. Jean had his arm lopped off by some really large gentlemen. So, Jean replaces his lost arm with a supernatural one. Jean then sets out to kick ass.

God Hand's combat is a three-tiered system. You have more than one-hundred basic techniques, which you pre-program into a string of personal combos; a set of "Roulette" moves, which are extraordinarily powerful special techniques – think kicking a guy into space, or pitching a flaming baseball at a group of enemies; and the God Hand gauge, which allows you to pull of endless combos at a sickening speed. Every move is so aggressive that fighting becomes funny; programming your techniques is like setting up your own jokes. God Hand is awesome. **Heather Campbell**

The Godfather

Respect

score 7.0

Xbox 360	N/A
EA	September
EA	M

It's tempting to rip into the idea of classics in cinema—and there are few movies finer than *The Godfather*—finding new form as a video game. But like anything else, if there's respect and understanding for the source material, the transformation to a different medium can yield magic. The Godfather, the game, is not magic.

But let's not get too harsh here. The Godfather is clearly as inspired by Grand Theft Auto as Coppola's original masterpiece, hitting some high marks as it attempts to bring more to this open world of crime and grit. The world is nicely rendered, lending a tone that true fans of the movie can appreciate, and anyone wanting to play the part of a powerful mobster family can get their gaming kicks out of. The city is alive with the energy of the time, filled with sights and sounds that compliment the fiction with a breath of reality. If this isn't entirely next-gen, it's what we've become accustomed to in ports.

There's nothing about The Godfather that is especially effective; it just plays well enough and carries enough fun ideas to work as a satisfying experience. If there is one major area missing that could have made it much more, it's the tepid treatment of the characters from the film. Carrying the same dramatic weight of the movie is no easy task, and the game just leaves you wishing for the impact the source material does indeed demand. **BF**

Naruto Clash of Ninja 2

Believe it! Or not

score 7.0

GameCube	4 player
Fighting	September 26
D3 Publisher	T

What Clash of Ninja 2 lacks in the graphics and innovation departments it seeks to make amends for in the fandom zone, inviting Tajutsu devotees to try their hand in multiple modes by including 4-player battles, survival and time-attack, spanning 23 endemic characters for one deep 3D fighter. But is it enough to fuel this GC exclusive at the system's twilight? That depends: While I like CoN2 just fine, there are better games to be had such as Uzumaki Chronicles and D3's own Ninja Council 2. Plus these cel-shaded fighters just don't get it done for me anymore. There are just so many cell-shaded anime based fighters already out there. Then again, if you don't own any yet (and you call yourself a fan) than CoN 2 is new to you so, proceed! It's an anime gamer's paradise for sure, jam packed with all of Jutsu-charged 3D brawling the series is famous for. The 4-player option is also a huge Naruto fan magnet. Beat down fun for the whole family. **Dave Halverson**

"It's an anime gamer's paradise for sure, jam packed with all of Jutsu-charged 3D brawling the series is famous for."

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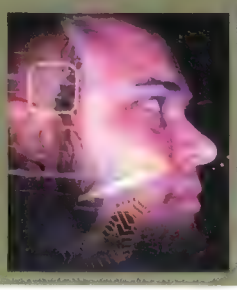
An original work reflecting Kazdal's love for sci-fi...

Imagining Worlds

One brush stroke at a time...

words **Brady Fiechter**



They're in cages and just freaking the f*** out, people are going and buying these things. It's horrifying; this one monkey just grabbed me and looked me in the eye," recalls concept artist Jake Kazdal, whose run-in with the monkeys in Japan came during his exclusive work with Tetsuya Mizuguchi (Lumines, Sega Rally) on Space Channel 5, Rez and "an amazing character-based action game that was canceled on Gamecube." Now with EALA, Kazdal talks about his passions as an artist who visualizes the gamespaces you eventually get to live in.

play: So talk to me about concept art and it's meaning to game design.
Jake Kazdal: It's about the visual structure of everything. Designing what the world looks like, what the rules are, how the lighting is going to work, what kind of shapes, what kind of colors, what kind of mood you're going for. You're thinking about the kind of emotion you want the player to feel when they're moving through a virtual space.

That's a big deal.
It's a *huge* deal. It's why it's so much fun doing what I do. I'm just so into it. I love watching movies and I love experiencing things, I love traveling and going to weird places. And my favorite games, I want to feel like I'm in that world.

Your favorite game.
Halo is the best game every made. Halo 1, mind you. That was a world: you felt the rules and you lived there. It was just brilliant.

When you're faced with an idea, what are you drawing off?
I'm just a huge video game nut as much as a concept artist. So I've got a cool position where I get to do a lot of game design on the front end and morph that into what it's going to look like later. We start from the script, what the story is supposed to be at that point, what story beats you want to hit. What do you want to present to the player at that point. What mental state is the player in, how familiar is he with the game system. I use a lot of photos, look at the internet a lot, read a ton of books. I'm always looking for weird ideas. I'll get ideas from something that doesn't look anything like what I might be working on, but I see how it's built or how it's put together, and I get a whole other idea that will work. It's hard to explain. Something can just set me off. I'll look at a caterpillar and I'll think of a robot and I'll go, "Oh dude, I could use those bits for something." I'll just feel something. It's hard, you have to catalog all these emotions you experience in daily life.

It's easy to simplify what you do as just drawing a picture.
I'm just so into it. There are ways to constantly push things forward. I take so many things into account it's just hard to describe the details that finally go into the image.

You worked with Tetsuya Mizuguchi, creator of hugely respected games like Rez Panzer Dragoon Saga, for quite a while in Japan. How did you get involved?
I read a big article about him, a huge biography on him. I was doing production 3D art and animation at the time for Boss Studios up in Seattle, and I knew all about him. What music he liked, what games he liked, I was just a big fan. I played Sega Rally like crazy when I was in college. It was a real laugh that I ended up working with the guys who did the Saturn port of Sega Rally. And I loved Panzer Dragoon, those were my other teammates for the Rez project. It was crazy, cuz I'm just a complete fanboy. But anyway, I had a chance to meet Mizuguchi at E3 98, and I knew at the time that the resume process is like a full-on written resume with pictures and stuff on it, like a passport picture. I had a Japanese friend translate for me, and I went through the whole process of preparing my resume before I met him. It turns out he we crafting a new team at the time, so he contacted me, we hit it off and had a great time. I showed him my demo reels, and he watched it a couple of times and things kind of went from there. We met a second time, drank through the night and discovered that we shared very similar influences and desires for making games. Six months later, I was working in Japan.

Is the process fairly similar there in Japan to you experiences on American projects?
Yeah, the process is pretty much the same. In Japan, they have a really good training system, the sempai system, where you work under somebody and you just train and train and train. Once you get into a job there, you're expected to be locked in for a long time.

Tastes there are obviously different.
It's funny, I introduced some of the Japanese guys to Halo, that free-form sort of gameplay wasn't really available at the time in Japan. Once those guys figured it out, they all snapped. They just loved it.

"I'll get ideas from something that doesn't look anything like what I might be working on."

~Jake Kazdal, artist

I find it interesting they don't tackle the first-person genre more.
Yeah, I don't know. I don't think there's the same market in Japan, and they always think of themselves. It's a strong gaming culture, that's what they know. That's why it was cool to work with Mizuguchi, he was trying to broaden that aspect a bit. Having an American on the team all the sudden it's a very different view. They would ask me, "How will Americans view this, what do you think about this?" We had some really different opinions on the character designs. I was helping to design Ulala from Space Channel 5, and the one I was doing was a lot more sultry and sexy, a little more hardcore. And they were more, "No, no, she's gotta be cute, cute cute cute." So I got these big wicked eyebrows and big wicked lips. She was hot as hell, but she was kind of different from what the Japanese aesthetic likes. But I learned a lot that way working back and forth with the art director, bringing it back down to where both the Japanese and Americans will like it. It was a phenomenal experience.

Living in Japan must have been a trip.
I'm a natural-born tripper. I love weird, trippy experiences. Every day there was something. Exhausting, but never boring...

As an artist, what game has impressed you the most in the past five years?
Psychonauts. The artists there are just so good. Running around that camp at night, meeting f*****g floating bears, f*****g invisible pumas that throw fire at you, just that little playhouse with the cowboy running on the TV set. That is a world, it exists somewhere. It's off the hook. You don't often get games like this.

How did you get interested in drawing?
My mom was an artist. I used to enter my crayon scribbles when I was really young, and I'd always get the blue ribbons. I just dug it. I would always doodle as a child. I remember buying Rebel Assault, and I had the box in my car, and I just noticed this wireframe mesh of this Stormtrooper. This was before real-time 3D at all. I could just see you could take this simple geometry, apply some textures to it, and have a believable 3D environment. That was it. I could see it was coming, and I knew it's what I wanted to do.

And now here we are. Despite all the questions right now, there are some great games out there.
There are just too many, and they're all too long. My whole campaign is for shorter games.

I totally agree.
I want a killer 5-10 hour experience.

I think there is a bigger audience that just doesn't have the time, but they absolutely want to play games.
I have this conversation every day with people at work. We all love video games, but no one has time to play them. We aren't seniors in high school any more, we don't have three months of summer vacation. I will finish a game that is seven hours, you don't have to pad it with filler like so much that's out there.

And then maybe be motivated to play it again.
I want to play Mass Effect so badly you just don't want to know, but I'm terrified to get into it. I don't want to start and not finish it.

With so much art and detail now getting packed into worlds, and hearing you talk about the process... just how big of a deal is what you do in the next-gen way of designing?
When I left Sega in 2003 I didn't know what a concept artist was. I didn't even know there could be such a thing. You did your own concept art, basically. You'd get it approved. But I like only doing the fun part; I didn't realize you could do that until much later, now I couldn't be happier. But yeah, we're to a point where you just need a full-time professional designer. You can't just randomly make shit.

You create the shape of the world to come.
Yeah, most of the top guys I know have industrial design backgrounds. We're designers by trade. We learn the process and theory of design and we apply it to the entertainment medium. I could make cups, I could make tape players.

So you're storyboarding in a sense, right?
Yeah, that's what I do. I read a designer's scripts, and I make the visuals, and we take it from there. We talk about it, we go over it, we review, we might take it into a really early version of 3D.

How do you judge your own work?
You know, I like to look at other people I like. I love the guys at Ubisoft Montreal. That stuff is just so f******g good. It's so beautiful and yet it's so informative. They do such a good job of communicating the space and the feeling and the mood and the shape of things. I look at a lot of movie books, stuff like that. I try and identify what people are doing right and what I might be doing wrong. And of course there's a lot of talent within our studio. It's good to constantly get feedback from other top artists internally.

If I asked you to do a drawing for me and I wanted something for a horror game, it's not just, "Ok, draw a haunted house."
It's not just a house. Ideally, you work very closely with the design team and know what they're trying to achieve. So when you understand the moment of gameplay, you're better able to illustrate what you want the player to feel. What is this world all about? Are we under pressure, are we relaxed, is it beautiful or harsh, is it barren, what are the emotions? Ideally, with one image, you can design a whole level. You can define a world in one painting. That's like the ultimate god complex that's realizable. You're able to illustrated this thing and have it go into this world, and all the sudden you've got a million people running through this painting. **play**

Original photo-shop painting, work in progress...

Developer	Piranha Bytes	Publisher	Aspyr Media
Online/Multi	none	Available	October

GOTHIC 3

Lose yourself in a land of choice

Dear Oblivion fans: Gothic 3 might be your next big fix. The third game in the series that pioneered this style of open world action RPG, Gothic 3 leaves the off-shore island of Khorinis and explores [illegible] inland. [illegible] phy of its [illegible] ehensively [illegible] ontains [illegible] and over [illegible] you may wander a comp[illegible] seamless landscape, experimenting with the game's omnipresent AI and world simulation. This seemingly colossal production is the three and a half year project of small German studio Piranha Bytes. We spoke to producer Blaine Christine of Aspyr Media about Gothic 3's late-development status.

Interview
Blaine Christine, producer, Aspyr Media

Mike Griffin

play: Gothic 3's release is just around the corner. How is the combat system progressing and how has it evolved?

Blaine: Since we are very close to the end of the development process, I'm happy to report that the combat is in fantastic shape; it's a definite highlight of this game. The most important thing to Aspyr and Piranha Bytes was making sure that players' concerns with the combat in Gothic 2 were addressed in a meaningful way. In Gothic 3, the combat is infinitely more fluid and enjoyable due to the new soft-lock targeting system and an all new animation system that makes hand-to-hand combat look incredibly realistic. Another fantastic addition to the combat this time around is the implementation of physics for the bow and arrow. You can quickly make an Orc into a hedgehog because you see the arrows stick—and stay—wherever you shoot them.

What kind of effect do the RPG elements have on combat and special abilities?

The RPG elements have a dramatic impact on combat and player abilities. Each time you level up, you gain ten learning points that can be spent with trainers that you encounter in the game world. These points can be spent any way the player wants: if you want to spend all of your points upgrading Strength, you can do that; if you want to spend all of your points to become a master of magic, that's okay too. Or you can divide your points between other attributes, magic, and combat skills. We have an all new "Perk" system in place for Gothic 3 that allows players to gain extra special benefits depending on what skills they place emphasis on. This assures that the player will be rewarded for making [illegible] specialize in a certain area. It [illegible] impossible for one character to [illegible] skills in a single playthrough.

This specialization sounds like it may lead to some pretty distinct heroes. How unique can a player make their character?

In terms of physical customization, we focus on a specific hero character so there's no personalization of [physical] features. Your look is determined by the armor you wear, which is determined by what skills you specialize in. There is armor that can only be worn by magic users, armor that can only be worn by warriors, and armor that can only be worn by thieves. This doesn't sound like a vast difference, but once you see the armor in-game and start to realize that each of these categories is drastically different, it's very c[illegible]ol.

Friend or foe?
Help the orcs pursue higher goals or turn against them by joining the human rebellion. Run the smelly bastards out of town and humans hiding in outlying forests will move back in and resume daily life, all via AI simulation.

"The game's open class system allows the player to create any type of character they want within the parameters of the world."

Blaine Christine, producer, Aspyr Media

How about character builds from an RPG perspective?

Gothic 3's character customization options are really limitless from an RPG standpoint. The game's open class system allows the player to create any type of character they want, within the parameters of the world. I find it very refreshing in an RPG setting to have to make critical character development decisions when I level up. I have no doubt that the community will get heavily involved in finding the optimum type of character spec for getting through the game and we anticipate many great debates on this topic.

Any big technical breakthroughs during Gothic 3's engine development?

Piranha Bytes is one of the most ambitious and talented developers I've had the pleasure to work with. For Gothic 3, they built this proprietary engine from the ground up which incorporates *all* of the latest bells and whistles you expect from a next-gen game. They also created their own game editor, which will be released to the public after the game's release. They took this beautiful hand-crafted world—truly one of the best looking games I've seen recently—and also managed to make it a seamless world with zero load times other than the initial load into the game. For a team of 20 main developers, the technical aspects alone are worthy of praise, not to mention an incredibly deep RPG gameplay experience with this amazing quest system.

What kind of steps were taken to get the immersion right between the player and the world? Third-person game, so stuff like terrain, collision and animations are important...

All of those issues become increasingly complex when you have a hand-crafted world instead of a tiled one, but I think the team has done a fantastic job. In terms of navigation, there are animations for moving on a variety of terrain types. The QA team has been paying special attention to all areas of the world to ensure that collision is as realistic as possible. The collision is extremely realistic in combat, so the player needs to be careful how they use certain types of attacks. One of the coolest things that can happen during combat is to watch an enemy accidentally hit one of their own; one orc hits another on a backswing and it starts a fight between them! This type of realistic collision can be used to the player's advantage by luring dumb enemies closer together so they begin to fight amongst themselves. The animations for the various types of weapons and attacks really need to be seen to be believed.

What sort of sound design should players expect in Gothic 3?

Kai Rosenkranz, the sound designer and composer, has done an incredible job with sound design in Gothic 3. I absolutely love using the bow and arrow simply for the sound of drawing back the bow. The longer you hold the button, the further you pull—and the sound is remarkably realistic. Outside of that, the music is fantastic and sets the mood very well for different scenarios without being intrusive. Of course there are transitions between exploration and combat tracks that provide the appropriate atmosphere. The voice over for Gothic 3 is also *much* better than anything heard in the previous games in the series for the US audience, due to the Hollywood casting director and professional LA-based voice actors (same crew as the Doom 3 and Call of Duty 2 voice productions).

Sit back and watch the wildlife go haywire on each other.

How non-linear is Gothic 3's storyline as the player progresses through the game?

The unique hook of Gothic gameplay has always been the open-ended feel of the world and storyline. There is a definite story arc that the player follows as they move through the game world, but the heart of G3's gameplay revolves around exploration and side quests. The side quests are critical to developing your character so you can master the tougher challenges late in the game and the exploration that occurs while completing these quests is what immerses the player in the world as opposed to simply the main storylines. With three different main factions that the player can side with and multiple minor factions, it is *very* unlikely that two players are going to have the same experience when playing through Gothic 3.

We've heard Piranha Bytes mention multiple endings. Will the game feature alternate outcomes based on the player's choices?

I don't want to give away too much right now, but I can tell you that ultimately you must make a choice to support one of the three main factions—the Orcs, Resistance, or Hashishin—and this choice has a major, direct impact on the game's ending.

Good enough. Let's not spoil any surprises! Thanks, Blaine.

Developer	DICE	**Publisher**	EA
Online/Multi	16-64p Conquest/Assault/Titan	**Available**	October

Battlefield 2142

Nightmare future is a multiplayer dream

Review

words **Mike Griffin**

The initial phase of the Battlefield 2142 review session was a brutal affair, as a ravaging pack of EA clan testers provided a live boot camp to remember. Is there a draft in here? I thought to myself after a particularly nasty round in the Tunis Harbor map, along the billowy Mediterranean Sea. My skull had been ventilated by another trail of angry SMG bullets. Eventually I fell into the groove and climbed the kill list, building up persistent stats and unlocking new combat gear and gadgets, all while observing a squad-based multiplayer shooter that feels like a futuristic Battlefield 2 update. Digital Illusions' BF 2142 shares its brethren's expertly distilled multiplayer first-person action and the new Titan mode instantly separates it from its peers.

Like the wall of ice that has advanced to the 49th parallel by the year 2140, so too does the level design flow in Battlefield 2142. DICE has used BF 2's core rendering technology to draw good-looking multi-climate environments that play host to a rock-paper-scissors doomsday melee. Conquest maps like Berlin have some of the best infantry street combat the series has ever known, with dozens of satisfying cover spots amid the abandoned skyscrapers' lower levels and surrounding urban sprawl. The familiar BF 2 play mechanics of commander and squad leader work like a charm in 2142, and the cross-kit unlocks (40 total) add loads of soldier depth. Coordination and support comes fast and furious, keeping pace with the action. There are ten Battlefield 2142 maps and they've been chiseled and honed for bullshit-free large scale multiplayer movement and interaction.

If you enjoy this brand of FPS gameplay at all, you'll probably want to play BF 2142 for the Titan maps and vehicles. They rule. Once the energy shield surrounding an enemy Titan is depleted, you can board the giant floating behemoth to begin infiltration. This can be done in a number of ways, including launching yourself hundreds of feet into the air aboard a screaming-fast assault pod. While the skirmish perpetuates itself aboard the Titan, the battle for Titan-slamming missile silos continues far below: awesome mechanized Battle Walkers plod across the land terrorizing infantry while Talon gunships fly past with pockets full of rockets.

At times, Battlefield 2142 sort of feels like you're playing a really good BF 2 mod and with that observation comes a pang of "been there, done that." Regardless, DICE has delivered a deftly constructed multiplayer shooter with titanic replayability that any fan of the form would be advised to experience right away.

Battlefield 2142

Score 8.0

\+ Titan gameplay is fresh and it's a blast. Addictive persistent gear and stats. Squash players by landing your assault pod on top of them

\- The soundtrack is too brooding for its own good. Rounds can be of excessive length on certain maps. Ragdoll bodies look wacky.

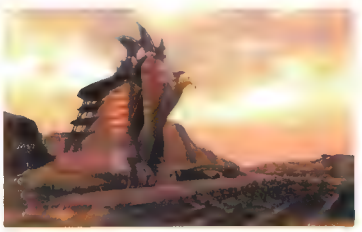
"...mechanized Battle Walkers plod across the land terrorizing infantry while Talon gunships fly past..."

Infiltrate the Titan core chamber and take it down.

Guild Wars Nightfall

In a pickle with a Hero sandwich

Developer	ArenaNet	Publisher	NCsoft
Online/Multi	Persistent online	Available	October



New cultures, heroes and villains are introduced to Guild Wars.

words **Mike Griffin**

We'd be remiss not to cover Guild Wars Nightfall again before it launches, around two weeks after this issue arrives. Following a pair of very successful campaigns, the ArenaNet founders are holding true to their promise of delivering full-length GW campaigns twice a year and only charging players for the game—never for the online service. Each campaign is a full-length stand alone title ready to host new players, or people can travel to the new lands with their existing characters and enter the storyline. Another team promise was that of gameplay evolution between campaigns. Guild Wars Factions introduced the duality of different paths, choosing sides in an ancient war. With Nightfall, the NPC henchmen system—a very popular element of the franchise—has been intensified with collectible Heroes that evolve and accept commands. And like previous entries, the hybrid fantasy environments that span this lengthy campaign often resemble a painting more than a polygonal construct.

> "...the alluring background for a new danger from a malignant fallen god."

The Hero gameplay should be one of the big draws for RPG players. Previous GW games received significant kudos for allowing players to complete quests "solo"—with the assistance of a band of NPC helpers. Essentially, the henchies attack what you're attacking and autonomously execute their skills. They're discarded on a whim after quests. The new Hero system in Nightfall gives players substantial control over special NPCs that stick around, evolve and level-up. You can prioritize their skill use, tell them to attack or defend, and move them to any area within range of your mini-map, where they stand guard until commanded to move. Using clever flag buttons, players can send their henchmen and Heroes to different spots. You can even hook-up and quest with other players who have their own Heroes. Where do you find Heroes? Sometimes they're a direct component of main story arcs, and in other instances you'll have to complete specific one-time quests to find exclusive NPCs. You can swap in new weapons for your Hero, add enhancement runes to their armor, and totally customize their attributes and skills. Managing all these builds could get tricky, so Nightfall introduces a Template feature that saves and manages all your character and Hero skill builds. You might transfer these templates to another computer, or perhaps send it to a friend for analysis.

Sun-soaked in another deep ambient score by Jeremy Soule, Nightfall's North Africa/Egypt-inspired Elona continent is the alluring background for a new danger from a malignant fallen god. Over 350 skills for every Guild Wars profession and several new PvP angles will be introduced in Nightfall. Play tests reveal the new Dervish profession is a fast scythe-wielding melee fiend with godly form-altering abilities, while the Paragon is the beacon of the people, a spear-thrower with bolstering holy shouts that buff nearby party members. All told, Nightfall joins the list of must-play autumn releases.

ask alienware

no 007 // november 2006

Q. There are some really impressive LCD monitors on the market with super-high resolutions that seem to go beyond "high-definition". Some of Dell's top-end wide 23" and 30" displays come to mind. I'd like to know how feasible it is to play games at 2000x resolutions with image enhancements like anisotropic filtering and anti-aliasing enabled. Does it require mega hardware to have a playable frame rate? Is it even necessary to anti-alias games at extremely high resolutions? Thanks!
Marc, Seattle WA.

Alienware: In order to simply play games at ultra high resolutions, such as 2560x1600, high-end hardware. However, if you are looking for an enhanced gaming experience with the highest anisotropic filtering and anti-aliasing setting, the latest graphics technology will make a difference. The bottom line, no matter what resolution you normally play your games at, the better the graphics card, the more detail you can experience, while maintaining high frame rates.

Q. I need some help weighing the pros and cons of laptops and desktops for gaming. I'm going to treat myself to a nice gaming PC this Christmas, and I'm on the fence about which format to choose. I travel for work about once a month; twice, tops. So the travel angle isn't hugely important for now. Although I wouldn't mind playing Battlefield 2 in a recliner...
Jim, Houston TX.

Alienware: There are two main differences between laptops and desktops, portability and performance. Though the performance gap between the two platforms has significantly closed (for example, the Alienware Aurora m9700 is the first notebook to offer *dual* graphics cards), desktops still deliver the best performance. The question you need to ask yourself is can you sacrifice a bit of performance so you can take gaming goodness with you as your travel or even to game on your recliner. Check out the Alienware website to compare the latest

technologies for notebooks and desktops.
Q. Is PCI-express going to remain the dominant form in video cards going forward? I'm one of these gamers still using an AGP card and wondering how soon before motherboard standards change again.
PS: Why do you need two "16 Lane" PCI-express slots for SLI or Crossfire?
Michael, Toronto ON.

Alienware: PCI-Express looks to remain the dominant form in video cards for next 4 years. If you are still running an AGP video card solution, now would be a good time to upgrade as ATI and NVIDIA continue to "end of life" more and more of their AGP video cards and transition their counterparts to PCI-E format. You need two 16 lane PCI-Express slots to run NVIDIA's SLI and ATI's Crossfire dual GPU solutions so both cards can effectively translate their screen renderings in equal performance, giving you seamless gaming performance on your screen.
Q. Recently I upgraded video and sound drivers and after about a week I found the PC had an irritating stuttering problem in virtually every 3D game I own. After some messing around, it looks like the only way I can get the system to stop stuttering is by using an older video driver from early 2005. Sadly this results in some weird graphical bugs in newer games. Here's my question: should I just do a system restore or rollback (never done one) to a time before I updated drivers?
Bradley, Omaha NE.
Alienware: Normally, when you are updating drivers you should only use drivers that come recommended directly from your hardware manufacture, not from any third party vendors. That being said, you should always check with your hardware supplier whose driver is performing faulty. If you're set on doing it your self, search online forums or community sites with users who could have your same problems. Remember, if all you did was a standard driver install and your seeing buggy hardware you're probably not the only one it has happened to so you could find an easy fix from others who have already experienced a fix for your problem.
Q. With Alienware offering Windows Media Center Edition PCs equipped with nice hardware for multimedia, I'm curious to know if Microsoft has any competition in this area? I'm sure MCE is fine software filled with lots of nice features, but I'd prefer not to be stuck without a choice in the matter when it comes to media center software. Or is it really a case of compatibility? It would be nice to have an alternate choice for media center software in my home and home network, but there's probably a reason why Bill Gates is #1 on the Forbes' list again this year.
Greg, Chicago IL.
Alienware: When it comes to media software Microsoft's Windows Media Center Edition is chock full of features and system benefits. If you are looking for an alternate to Media Center Software then check out great Windows XP media applications like Cyberlink's Power DVD for DVD playback and Sony's Sound Forge Audio Studio for music playback, and some of Google's free Web based software mods for other multimedia needs. However, you'll be pretty hard pressed to find entertainment multimedia software that goes above and beyond Windows Media Center Edition for all you multimedia needs.

System(s)	GBA	Publisher	Atlus	Available	Oct. 31
Developer	Sting	Online/Multi	N	ESRB Rating	E 10+

Yggdra Union

words

There's a select group of gamers out there that will declare Yggdra Union a must-have the minute they lay eyes on it, due to a level of character design that can only be found in the best Japanese RPGs and anime. They won't be disappointed...

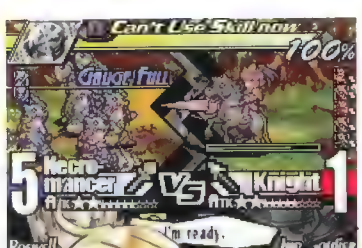
Fantasinia Kingdom has fallen to the New Bronquain Empire, but the princess (Yggdra), aided by her bravest knights, has managed to escape. Cornered by Bronquain assassins she takes refuge in a thief's stronghold, which they waste no time in torching to smoke her out. But before the smoke clears, the thieves, lead by Milanor, return and handily defeat the legion (hence your training begins). Taken up with the princess in exchange for her castle, the uncommon bedfellows band together to reclaim the kingdom, setting out to join forces with Yggdra's remaining forces and Milanor's allies. Luckily for Milanor, Yggdra comes bearing powerful ancient cavalry cards handed down by the knights that gave their lives to protect her-- nothing like a good starter deck in a heated card battle.

Yggrda Union's dialogue unfolds through beautifully-drawn character overlays hovering above a simplistic overhead map, via a stylish, well-executed interface. From there, it's all in the cards: troop movement, deployment... all the usual suspects, but unlike many a card battle the player's role doesn't end once the skirmish begins. Rather than sit back and watch the player, you determine and control aggressive or passive battle, balancing energy and power using the D-Pad, while also keeping an eye on the enemy's aggression level as it climbs during battle. There are nuances galore pertaining to skills, specials, and various tactics, but they are dispersed in moderation allowing the player to grasp each tactic before learning something new. The end result is something of a living graphic-novel fused with gorgeous battles and all the drama you might expect from a game bearing this level of artistry. If you like what you see, the choice is clear: Your kingdom awaits.

Yggdra Union — score 8.0

\+ character design by manga artist Satoko Kiyuzuki and storyline by Riviera: The Promised Land artisan [illegible] great battle system, adept writing, [illegible] and a varied soundtrack.

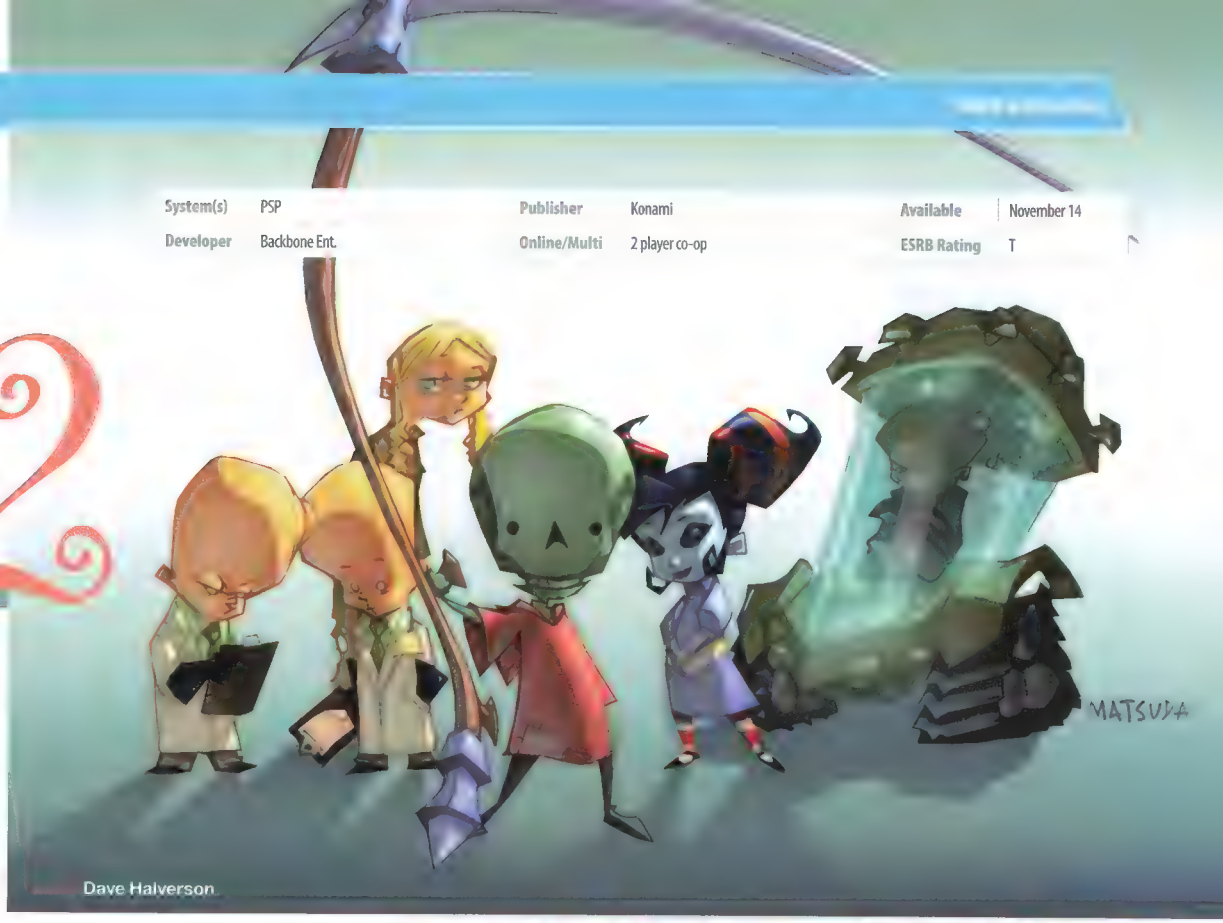
\- Some may not like the style of strategy-RPG battle on the handheld.



System(s)	PSP	Publisher	Konami	Available	November 14
Developer	Backbone Ent.	Online/Multi	2 player co-op	ESRB Rating	T

Death Jr. 2
Root of Evil

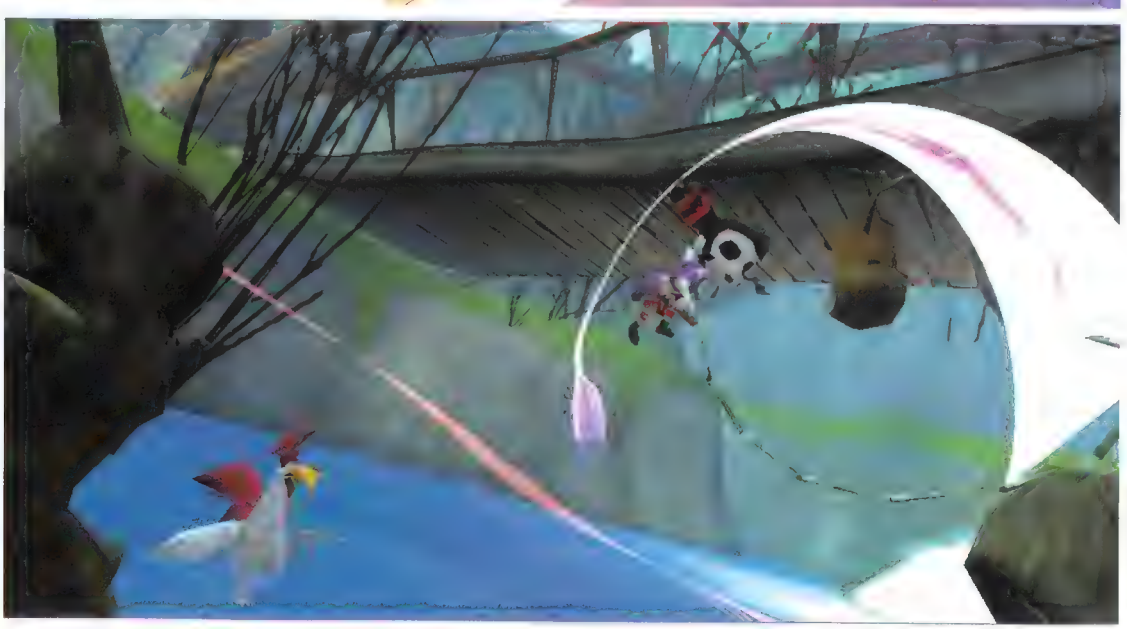
Sowing the seeds of evil



Dave Halverson

Death Jr. 2: Root of Evil is more rebirth than sequel. As good as the first game was, it was also considered quirky in the control department, and, while loaded with shooting bliss and wonderfully outlandish cartoon goth, a tad rough around the edges. Backbone could have just tightened things up and given us more of the same for the sequel but instead have completely reworked the formula and created one of the PSP's finest games in the process. On par with Psychonauts, DJ stands as a testament to what original character action games from independent studios bring to the gaming table. And it's never tasted quite so pungent.

Joining DJ for this horticulture of horror is the frisky-as-ever Pandora who can be played as either the main character from the get-go or via wireless in the best 2-player co-op action any handheld device has ever seen. I rarely enjoy co-op action but DJ2 was clearly designed from the ground up to be equally enjoyable as either a single- or two-player experience. Either way, the name of the game remains the same: shooting *and* platforming paradise. Where the original game focused on gunfire and had little room to spare, DJ2 packs even more bang for the buck—tied to a buttery new control system no less—along with scads of platforming elements akin to the finest high-dollar console platforming epics. It's the best of both worlds to the degree that fans of both will find themselves utterly spellbound for the duration. The stages have seemingly quadrupled in size yet manage to look a generation (or two) better. Whatever they left in the PSP's tank the first time they've sucked dry in the second. And to make all of this new real estate more palatable, the control scheme has been skillfully overhauled. Tapping L and R together locks in and disengages strafe mode,



"It's the best of both worlds to the degree that fans of both will find themselves utterly spellbound for the duration."

Not even DJ can resist a 50% sale.

working in accord with the new proximity targeting system. Rather than locking on and off of a single subject, the game works in harmony with the player—a vital piece of the puzzle when you're dealing with such a wily array of spewing flora, hulking goons, and stampeding hordes, such as laser-shooting chickens. No need to wait until levels end to upgrade either. Dead guppy stations are scattered throughout each stage where you can spend collected energy reaped from your victims to upgrade DJ and Pandora's melee attacks and weapon inventory, or assemble additional guns, provided you've found the hidden pieces along the way—reason to clean out each gigantic set piece. Smith and Weston are still hard at work, although the old hub system has been replaced with spirited cinemas

"It just doesn't get any better on handheld."

that work the entire cast into the story via glorious CG. Hammering the final nail into this super deluxe double-wide coffin, you'll also find a passel of unforgettable bosses, a soundtrack worth owning (it really must be made available) and among the best sound effects on the PSP. It just doesn't get any better on handheld, that I know of. DJ 2 is flat out wall to wall fun from beginning to end.

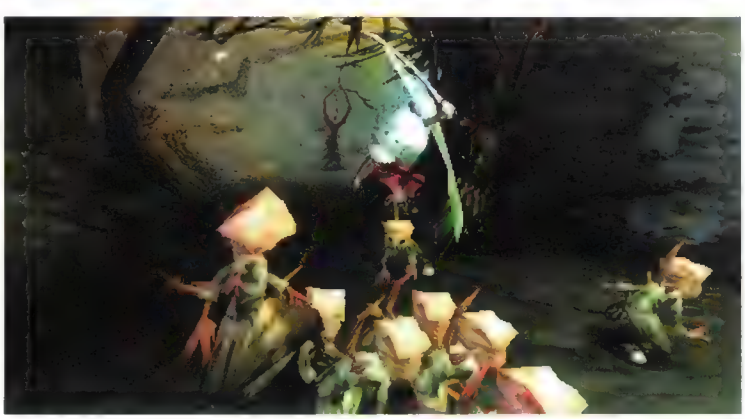
When my time is up I hope DJ takes the call. These guys know how to party. **play**

Death Jr. 2: Root of Evil

score 9.5

\+ Immense areas rich in platforming and shooting euphoria. Camp heaven in places like the mall. Awesome OST and sound effects, cool story, great CG.

\- Hmmm, let's see... I like edge animation... and some of the swinging sections may be hard for beginners. Not that that's a negative. Games are supposed to be challenging, remember?



System(s)	PSP	Publisher	SCEA	Available	October 3
Developer	SCEE London Studio	Online/Multi	GameShare	ESRB Rating	T

Gangs of London

Glower of London

words Greg Orlando

Instead of scaring young toughs straight, it might be better to hand them a copy of Gangs of London for the PSP and let them play it until they renounce violence forever, become straight-A students, and devote all their time to charitable endeavors.

Gangs of London comes to the PSP from the makers of The Getaway and its sequels. The game offers third-person perspective on-foot and vehicle-based action, and players can choose to fight, win, and die as one of five gangs, each with its own set of attributes in terms of its vehicles and members. The game offers stealth, shooting, squad-based combat, vehicle hijacking, car chases, and melee brawls, and this should come as no surprise to anyone who's played any of the Getaways. It will also come as no surprise that London features many of The Getaways' flaws. The apple, after all, never falls far from the tree.

As a jack-of-all-trades, London masters nothing. Its Tom Clancy-esque sneaking bits are certainly not much fun at all; they embrace the tired game cliché that says the mere act of moving while crouched somehow magically transforms someone into a hyper-silent ninja. With the crouch, anything is possible: Players can sidle up to guards and rival gang members, stand directly on their shoes and, impossibly, defeat their peripheral vision. It's also possible to be hunkered down and press into the back of the enemy's legs with no ill effect; such is the power of the crouch.

The game's shooting sequences are similarly flawed. It seems odd that a game about criminals who routinely plug each other with guns would feature a lock-on system that uncannily ignores a nearby target in favor of one that's farther away and also hidden behind cover. Attributing this glitch to someone's planning seems, to put it mildly, cuckoo bananas.

Driving, too, is problematic. This is unfortunate because a lot of the missions

> "Missions eschew Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories' aimless wandering, dropping players right into the action."

involve vehicles—not just stealing them or shooting the bad boys who emerge from them, but also using them to get from A to B. There's a genuine lack of speed associated with all the cars. The game lists the Talwar Brothers gang as having the highest vehicle top speed, but even its cars don't cut through the streets as much as they leisurely meander through them. With the sense of velocity excised, so too goes any exhilaration that might occur during the game's many high-speed chases.

On the mean streets, the cars don't handle as well as they should, either. There's a blockiness that's associated with the sports cars as much as it is with its heavier, slower vans. Navigating through London's twisty, curve-laden streets becomes an exercise in banging into stuff, making awkward three-point turns, and restarting when the situation becomes untenable.

Despite its flaws, London manages to eke out a few victories here and there. There's a lot to explore, and the game includes a fairly large city, but the developers have wisely opted to excise the junk. Missions eschew Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories' aimless wandering, dropping players right into the action. Each of the challenges here can be beaten in about five minutes, too, making the game perfectly tuned to a handheld's sensibilities. Best of all, the game records a player's progress after every mission, avoiding the need to put a PSP to sleep if he can't—or doesn't have the time to get to—a fixed, in-game save point.

You've got to admire the English. Always dressed to kill.

"Comic book-style cut-scenes introduce every one of the game's story mode missions, and these are all highly well done."

Comic book-style cut-scenes introduce every one of the game's story mode missions, and these are all highly well done. Sony serves up some black humor here, presenting scenarios where a psychotic criminal sends his associates out to fetch a knife from his favorite cutlery place or where a thug's oral fixation gets him in hot water with rival gangs.

Modes such as the quirky zombie-whacking Four Weeks Later let players roam the streets of London unimpeded, and are generally more fun than the game's story mode. Pub games, including darts, billiards (both in the style of the United Kingdom and the United States), and the pin-based skittles, prove to be ample distraction from the game's main fare.

There's even an exceedingly neat, turn- and card-based gang war that does away with the game's flawed driving-shooting-sneaking, replacing them with an addictive bit of strategy and empire building. Gang battle requires players to acquire new territories by purchasing both advantage-conferring cards and soldiers. Each turn allows for three—and only three—moves, and it's essential that not one is wasted. This is, oddly, the best London has to offer.

This portable Getaway has its share of ugly gangster gameplay and bullet holes. Yet in some real ways it presents a nice alternative to the more straightforward Liberty City Stories. Crime doesn't pay as much as it should here, but at least London, as with the real-world city that inspired it, has its crooked charms. **play**

Gangs of London

score 5.0

+ Great comic book-style cut-scenes; missions are perfectly tailored for handheld play; excellent strategy-based card game

- Poor controls; Gangs of London lashes most of The Getaway's crimes flaws

Summon Night: Swordcraft Story 2

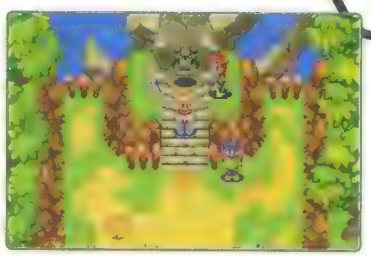
score 8.0

System	GBA	Online/Multi	1-2 Players
Developer	Flight Plan	Available	October
Publisher	Atlus	ESRB Rating	Teen

Atlus, you sneaky devils... you've timed things perfectly so that gamers have had just enough time to pick up the first GBA Summon Night, beat it, and be left wanting more. Then whammo, here comes the second.

Like the original, Summon Night 2 is a whimsical action RPG that follows the life of a young Craftlord (male or female, your pick) who must refine their weapon crafting skills while also trying to save the world. I was slightly sad to see the main character thrust into the role of hero right off the bat–I enjoyed the fighting tournament opener of the previous game–but thankfully personality and humor once again overflow from the cast of characters you'll meet along the way.

Of course, a game about a weapon craftsman would be pointless without actual weapon crafting, and the amount of options you now have available for forging that perfect sword or axe have been greatly expanded. As well, not only will the fruits of your labor come in handy when engaging in the game's real-time side scrolling battles (which are still loads of fun), but now environmental objects can also be destroyed with the right weapon in hand. Toss in improved graphics and audio, a much lengthier quest, and some additional aspects that I won't spoil for you, and you have another enjoyable RPG to lose many an hour with. **Eric L. Patterson**



Children of Mana

score 6.5

System	Nintendo DS	Online/Multi	1-4 Players
Developer	Square Enix	Available	October
Publisher	Nintendo	ESRB Rating	RP

At its best, Children of Mana is a gorgeous adventure, filled with lovely art and visual character. You can only demand so much production value from your DS, and Children of Mana often reaches high ground in both sophistication and artistry. At its worst, the game degenerates into mundane stretches of dungeon battles, where the same scenery and basic enemies squeeze off the fun.

That's not to see the game doesn't have its stronger gameplay moments. Boss battles are a decent payoff to clearing out each new section, challenging your multiple move sets and level of skill progression. The combat is pretty straight-forward, with simple combos and a stat-elevating system that involves mixing gems. It's about as old-school as you'd want, but then again that's part of the charm that makes Children of Mana more than it probably is without nostalgia by its side.

If it's a story you'd like in this adventure, it's one you're going to need a lot of tolerance and added imagination to fill in for. The threadbare dialogue is awfully random and tacked on, feeling like little more than an excuse to link the next dungeon to the plot. Multiplayer doesn't help much either, given that you're still stuck in the same dungeons as the single-player sexperience. **Brady Fiechter**

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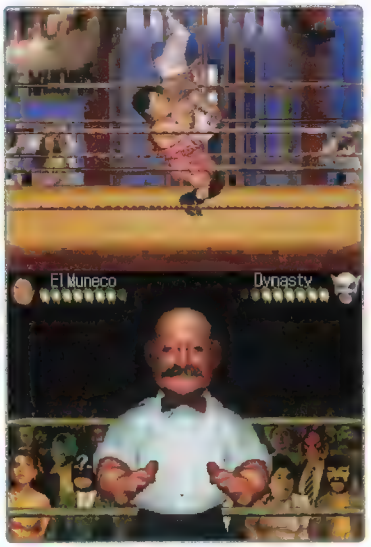


Nacho Libre

score 7.5

System	Nintendo DS	**Online/Multi**	1-4 Players
Developer	Budcat Creations	**Available**	October
Publisher	Majesco	**ESRB Rating**	E 10+

Greeted by the cherub-like Mexican boy, Chancho, in front of the orphanage of St. Lo Que, you are about to embark on the story of the boy who would go on to become the greatest luchador in all of Mexico! His name was Ignacio—but we all know him as Nacho!

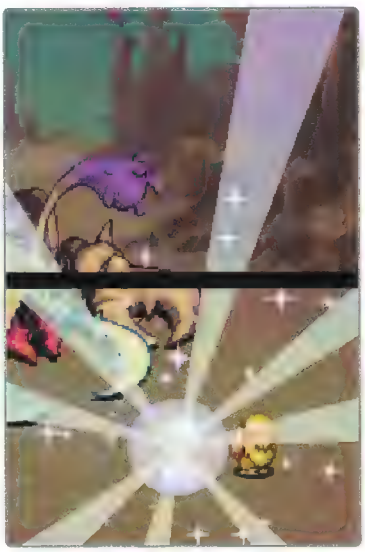
Whether you've seen the movie or not or love or loathe the sweet smell of Lucha; you must do the honorable thing and feed your NDS this spicy burrito. Not since Sega invented fish-with-man-heads have I seen anything quite as deliciously broken as Nacho Libre, where Monty Python cut 'n' paste meets the quirkiest 3D mélange the DS has ever seen. The meat of the game revolves around Nacho's rise to become the greatest luchador in all of Mexico, told through bizarre, uncommon and often unnatural mini-games; Nachoball, Chariot Jumping, foot races, salad preparation and so on—all taking spectacular advantage of the stylus—and wrestling matches (featuring all 20 luchadors from the movie) that even the most anti-wrestling advocate will find strangely enthralling if not completely side-splitting. The control, oddly enough, is as user-friendly and precise as the best console wrestlers out there, while the wrestlers and moves themselves are like nothing you've ever seen; the term meat puppets immediately springs to mind. **Dave Halverson**

Magical Starsign

System	Nintendo DS	**Online/Multi**	NA
Developer	Brownie Brown	**Available**	October 23
Publisher	Nintendo	**ESRB Rating**	E 10+

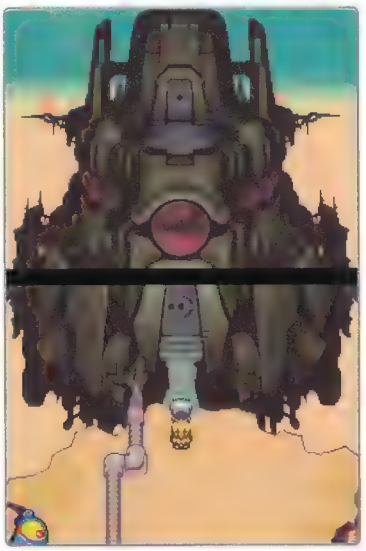
I love role playing games. In fact, I feel a little like I grew up with the genre. Dragon Warrior (a.k.a. Dragon Quest) came out for the NES when I was ten years old, and from that point on, I was hooked.

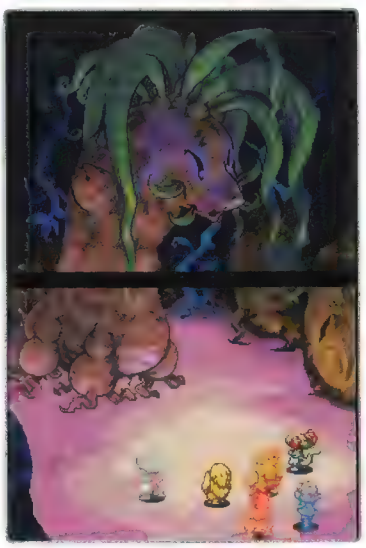
Magical Starsign is the RPG I should have been given when I was a kid. The sprites are gorgeous, and the characters all overflowing with personality. It's an introductory RPG, perfect for those who are just being introduced to the ideas of turn-based attacks or magical strengths and weaknesses. If you're an adult interested in getting back to basics, Starsign will take you on a familiar journey of friendship overcoming insurmountable odds. There's nothing more imposing than tiny heroes facing off against two-screened enemies.

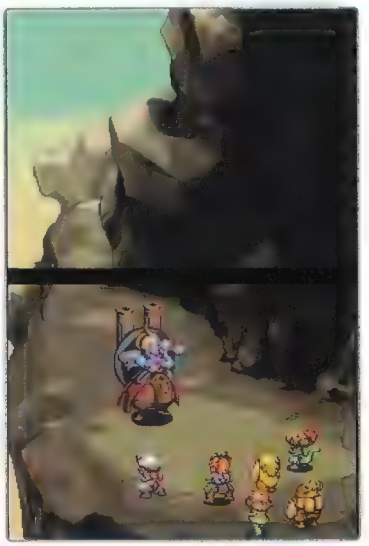


The writing can get saccharine at times, and a little cliché, but who isn't a little taken with the idea of going to magic school? Starsign is the sequel to Magical Vacation (an import-only title for the GBA), and these kids do take a trip; after losing their teacher on another planet, the heroes take off across the galaxy to save their mentor . . . and the world.

Starsign's interface is stylus-only. Guiding your avatar around on screen is possible with the D-Pad, but it's apparent that Brownie Brown intends you to poke your way through the galaxy. This is actually pretty nice; how often have you wanted to just select your spell with one click, as opposed to scrolling through a million menus? **Heather Campbell**







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Naruto: Ninja Council 2

score 7.0

System	GBA	Online/Multi	1-2 Players
Developer	Aspect	Available	October 10
Publisher	D3 Publisher	ESRB Rating	E

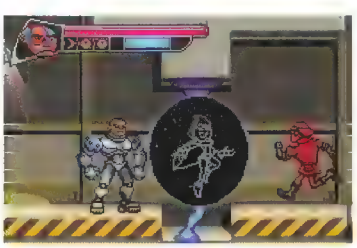
Ninja Council 2 continues Naruto's fine ride on the GBA format, retaining all of its endearing pseudo-16-bit blips and bleeps while beefing up the graphics and platforming ante considerably. Divided into side-scrolling levels fraught with "defeat all enemies" challenges and the Chunin Exams torrent of bosses, the usual fare applies-- collecting scrolls and dishing out Jutsu and an array of attacks—only now it looks and plays even better than before, and you can switch between Naruto, Sasuke and Sakura on the fly. You can even call on backup characters during a fight to help tilt things in your favor with their special Jutsus.

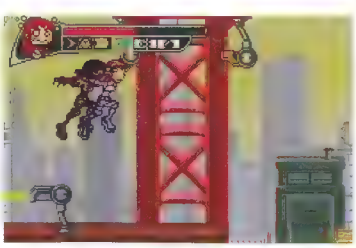
Dashing sequences and platforming bits do well to break the monotony, and the character animation is silky smooth. You can also link up for two-player co-op or Vs. play. **Dave Halverson**

Teen Titans 2

System	GBA	Online/Multi	NA
Developer	A2M	Available	October
Publisher	Majesco Sales	ESRB Rating	E10+

A2M's second soirée with the Titans finds them in a much tighter, better laid out game, riding on the same tried-and-true side-scrolling framework as the original, as they go back to work to thwart The Brotherhood of Evil…once Robin frees them. The game begins when Robin breaks free, and begins searching for his friends, wall springing, upper cutting, double jumping, and exploding shuriken tossing his way up the games erector-set type platform puzzles, reminiscent of Spiderman 32-X. Once each Titan is free their unique abilities work in concert with the flow of the game or you can team up, and unleash team attacks; some for offense, others for speed, and so fourth. Bosses include Monsieur Mallah, General Immortus, and the master mind of the Brotherhood of evil himself—the Brain. Wonder if he's playing Big Brain Academy? Apparently not. **Dave Halverson**



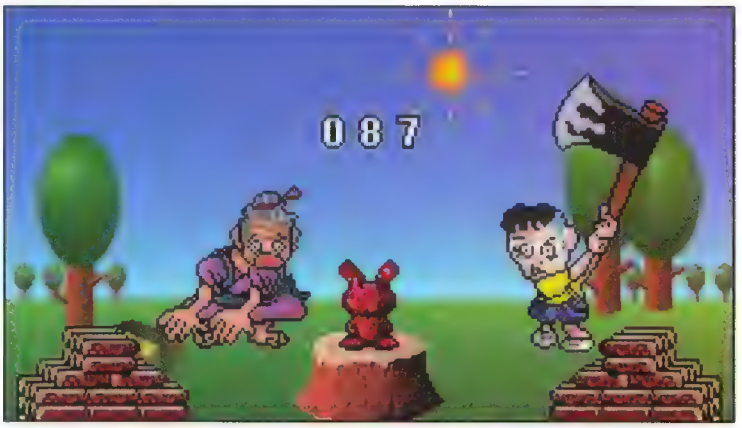


WTF: Work Time Fun

score 8.0

System	PSP	Online/Multi	2-8 ad hoc
Developer	Sony Computer Entertainment Japan	Available	October 17
Publisher	D3Publisher	ESRB Rating	Teen

Welcome to menial drudgery as done by WTF: Work Time Fun. Here, you work some 40-odd minigame jobs in order to earn money to buy junk, including more jobs. You'll field baseballs, put an infinite number of pen caps on an infinite number of pens, and generally marvel at how tedium becomes fun here. **Greg Orlando**



ERRATA! **Star Fox Command**

Last month, an error occured and we displayed a score for Star Fox Command of 7.5 . The correct score is shown at right. Sorry Fox!

score 8.5

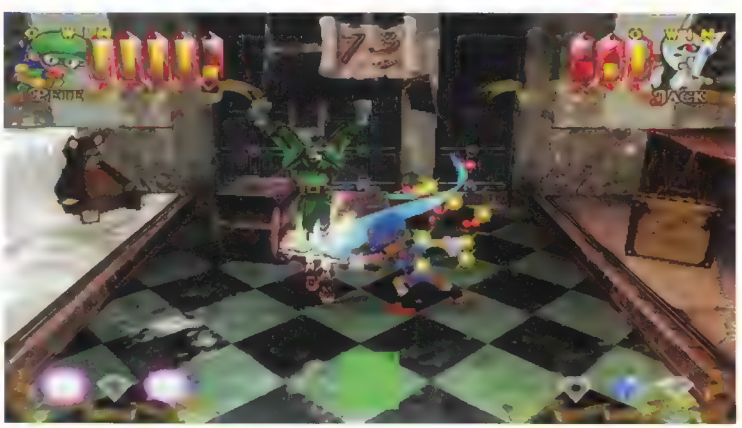
Power Stone Collection

score 6.5

System	PSP	Online/Multi	1-4 Players
Developer	Capcom	Available	October
Publisher	Capcom	ESRB Rating	Teen

Ask people to name the games that defined what made the Dreamcast the must-have system that it was, and it won't be long before somebody brings up Power Stone. Capcom crafted a fighting game series that combined fast-paced action with light-hearted humor, and has now re-introduced the games on the PSP, beefed up and packed with extras. For example, Power Stone 1 gains the added faces from the second game, new items and weapons abound, and even the original Dreamcast VMU mini games make an appearance.

Unfortunately, it doesn't take long to realize that Power Stone's core gameplay hasn't aged so well. Both games just feel somewhat shallow at this point, and while multi-player can still be enjoyable, the fun to be had from single player battles quickly runs out. There's also another problem... while perfect for many a project, the PSP's screen simply cannot handle all the chaotic action presented here. It's far too easy to lose track of what is going on due to the reduced screen size, especially in four-player Power Stone 2 battles, and many of the charms of the game are lost with the loss in resolution. If only this collection had been on a home console instead, with online multi-player support tossed in for good measure. **Eric L. Patterson**



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Released by	Geneon Entertainment	Running Time	NA
Rating	16+	Available	November 21

Ergo Proxy

Gothic beauty

words Heather Campbell

'Ergo Proxy takes itself very seriously. Opening with a quote from Michelangelo, and featuring references to the Turing Test and Descartes.'

In the futuristic dome city of Romdo, robots and humans coexist peacefully. Cyborgs are everywhere; they are drivers, servants, friends and co-workers. Called Autoreivs, their integration into human society has allowed for the development of a techno-utopia. They're functional or friendly, like an appliance that can have a conversation. That is, until one Autoreiv becomes cognizant. And then another. Infected with the "Cogito Virus," these androids become self-aware, and set out to discover their identity. Are these robots' souls a product of the virus, or did the virus make them aware of their souls?

To answer the question, they start murdering people.

Ergo Proxy takes itself very seriously. Opening with a quote from Michelangelo, and featuring references to the Turing Test and Descartes, this upcoming release from Geneon is a real, real hard-core cyberpunk thriller. Ergo Proxy aims at Phillip K. Dick, and then lays out its suspenseful tale in ultimate style. I mean, yeah. This show is gorgeous, dark, smoky and dystopian. Though I don't know if Geneon is releasing the show in hi-res, it originally aired in HDTV, so be ready for some potential 720p detail.

Our protagonist in this gloomy, mysterious, and authoritarian world is Re-l, easily one of the most beautiful heroines to ever grace an anime. With her impeccable makeup and hair, this Intelligence Agency inspector is a combination of *Ghost in the Shell*'s Motoko Kusenagi, *The X-Files*' Dana Scully, and Robin, of *Witch Hunter* fame. Re-l is quiet, Goth, and introspective, and quick to take off her clothes in front of the camera (which, I guess, is an easy thing to do when you have a body like hers). As a girl, I'm jealous of her make-up. I wish I could do my eye-shadow like that.

Not enough can be said about the high production values of this show. Ergo Proxy looks like a theatrical release; the animation is really fluid and slick. Action sequences are smashingly choreographed, and the shot choices are inventive without being disorienting. Ergo Proxy's deep greys aren't the best for afternoon viewing – this is a show meant to be watched at night. It's a stiff, ponderous, evening show, like CSI for the anime set. And it's not like anything else that's being released right now.

The bottom line is Ergo Proxy is pretty, and pretty heady stuff. There haven't been many anime catering to the brain lately, and it's with parched anxiousness that I look forward to quenching my thirst for some anime cyber-noir. It doesn't hurt that the show is so gorgeous; making philosophy palatable is something anime doesn't do well, but with visuals like these, it makes the medicine go down that much smoother.

Ergo Proxy or the new Evanescence? You be the judge.

Magic has mishaps, add girls and it's MAYHEM!

Negima! ネギま!
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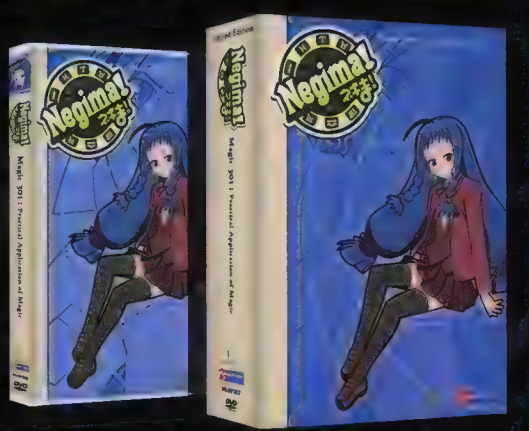

From the creator of *Love Hina*, Ken Akamatsu

www.negima.tv

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Kodansha

FUNIMATION ENTERTAINMENT
A NAVARRE CORPORATION COMPANY

Released by	Geneon Entertainment	Running Time	50 minutes
Rating	16 and up	Available	December 5

HELLSING ULTIMATE

Monster Madness

words **Dave Halverson**

Fans of the Hellsing manga who found the TV series overly drawn-out will get their fill and then some from the OVA, which gets right to the bloodletting. Scenes that devoured entire episodes are reduced to minutes—the love-struck vampires on a mutilation spree springs to mind—while others that were too brief, such as Father Anderson's inaugural rampage, have been gratefully prolonged.

Things get underway quickly as Integra's father draws his final breath, leaving The Hellsing Organization to her, sending his brother into a murderous rage. Cut to the bowels of the castle and Alucard's resurrection is at hand: The dark legacy is risen, the psycho sibling eradicated, and it's to the church we go before you can say amen. Seras Victoria's baptism of blood is next, after Alucard is forced to blow a softball-sized hole in her right breast to vanquish a vampire priest whose flock is feeding on Seras's fellow officers. Immediately following the bloody tryst, Ultimate's jarring contrast makes its bubbly debut as Seras wakes up in her new home to a cheeky manga-style dream sequence. Thankfully it's short lived. The next time we see her she's locked, loaded and ready to kill sans any of the indifference she exhibited in the TV series. She won't drink blood yet but she accepts her dark gift straight away. In fact, when the Vatican's killing machine shows up, she's got her boot on a vampire's head, ready to pop it like a melon… Then all heaven breaks loose.

The art and animation is at times stunning—you can see where the animators pick and choose their moments—and I love the way Ultimate is put together, using lots of panning, close-ups, fast edits, digital effects, and diorama-type set pieces; it's a gorgeous amalgam of techniques. The dialogue (all of the TV series voice talent has returned) is also more biting and the gore…bring a tarp. There's a good bit of CG mixed in too, but only when it's needed to enhance a scene, and Seras is simply delightful in all of her newfound immortal revelry. I pray that Hellsing Ultimate finishes as strong as it's started, unlike the TV series which fizzled miserably at the end. Something tells me I don't need to worry. There must be enough Seras Victoria collectibles money to run a small country by now.

"Cut to the bowels of the castle and Alucard's resurrection is at hand..."

Hellsing Ultimate

SCORE **9.0**

+ All of the blood, none of the fluff. Ultimate gets right to the business at hand. Wholesale elimination.

– Manga infused scenes provide stark contrast.

Ergo Proxy
Available Now
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www.ErgoProxyDVD.com
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Disgaea

Hellacious High-Jinx

words Dave Halverson

Publisher	Broccoli Books	Genre	Action/Comedy	Volume	1
Story	Arashi Shindo	Art	Arashi Shindo	Rating	13+

It's easy to see why so many gamers flock to the Disgaea series every chance they get. Who knew that demons were so much fun? The manga gets underway with Etna waking up Prince Laharl from his two-year nap, during which his father, King Krichevskoy, the overlord of the Netherworld, has died. Showing little to no remorse—hey, they're demons—Laharl receives a rude awakening when he goes to claim his throne. Seems that during his two-year snooze a passel of dysfunctional demons have been gunning for the big chair…time to clean house. Together with his vassals, the fork-tongued Etna and Flonne the love zealot join Laharl for a Netherworld excursion that'll make you clamor for the gates of hell.

Read it if... You can read. 198 pages of fun to be had.

Snow

Big Bang Theory

words Dave Halverson

"the best thing to come out of TokyPop's Rising Stars."

Publisher	TokyoPop	Genre	Action		
Volume	1	Rating	13+		
Story	Morgan Luthi	Art	Morgan Luthi		

Snow would be more at home as an animated feature—it certainly reads like one—but I'll take this amazing manga just as well. When a destroyer of worlds harnessed within a human host gets a conscience, the universe's warmongers bear down on the remote planet Hub; the last bastion for the galaxy's outcasts. There, Ghost finds refuge with a band of freedom fighters, working to maintain a sense of order in the city. But trouble is close behind… Morgan Luthi is the best thing to come out of TokyPop's Rising Stars of Manga by far.

Read it if... Giant robots, space pirates, aliens, interstellar burger joints. What's not to love?

Welcome to the NHK

The Anime Conspiracy

words Dave Halverson

"Tatsuhiro hasn't been out of his house in four years."

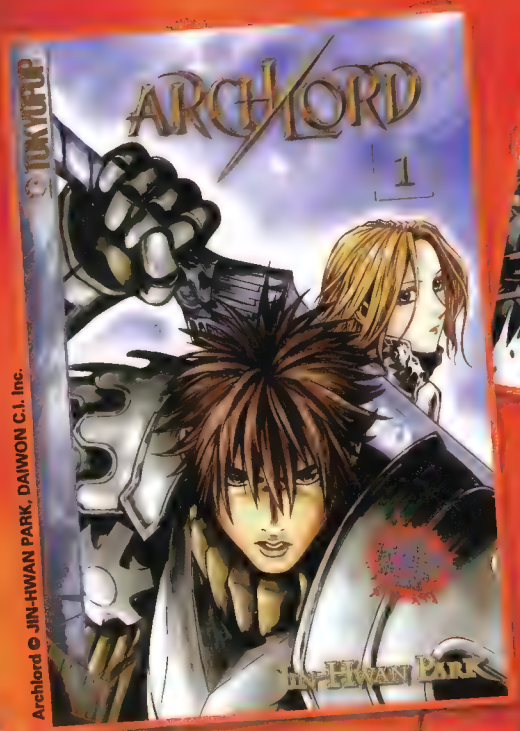
Publisher	TokyoPop	Genre	Drama/Comedy		
Volume	1	Rating	18+		
Story	Tatsuhiko Takimoto	Art	Kendi Oiwa		

College dropout turned shut-in (or hikikomori) Satou Tatsuhiro hasn't been out of his house in four years. Making matters worse, his next-door neighbor blasts anime music at the crack of dawn, and the mail-order drugs he's on are causing his refrigerator, TV, and speakers to come to life in his dreams, that—any loyal appliances would-- alert him to the fact that NHK (the Japanese Broadcasting Corporation) is really a covert operation converting shut-ins into otaku through high-quality anime series. How we get from here to creating the greatest hentai game ever is an illegally good time.

Read it if... You yearn for the kind of decadent comedy writing that dried up here decades ago, if it ever existed at all.

TOKYOPOP

THE STORY OF HEROES THAT BECAME LEGENDS... BEGINS IN THE MANGA!!



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Blood+: Twin Wing Battle Ronde

Publisher: SCEI | **System:** PlayStation 2 | **Available:** Now (Japan)

listen to this

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Selections from Final Fantasy XII OST

Publisher: Tofu Records

Composed, arranged and produced by Hitoshi Sakimoto; when you've finished playing the greatest RPG ever created, the OST is the best way to reconnect.

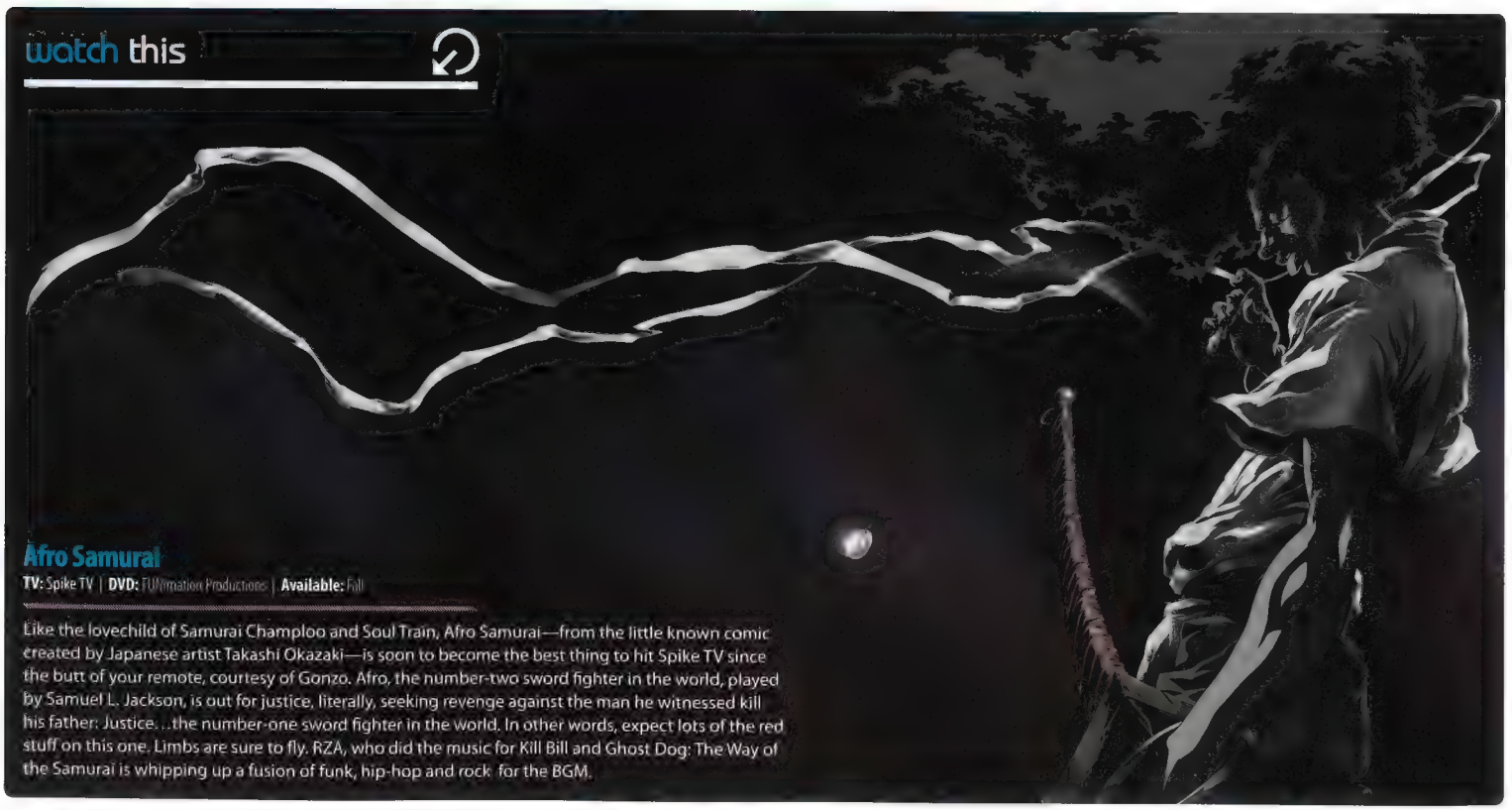
read this

Kingdom Hearts Chain of Memories

Publisher: TokyoPop | **Volume:** 1 | **Rating:** All Ages
Adapted by: Shiro Amano | **Genre:** Fantasy

The door to Kingdom Hearts will open once more as Sora, Donald, and Goofy enter Castle Oblivion in search of King Mickey and Riku. Never leave a mouse behind! Disney-infused fantasy awaits all who turn these pages.

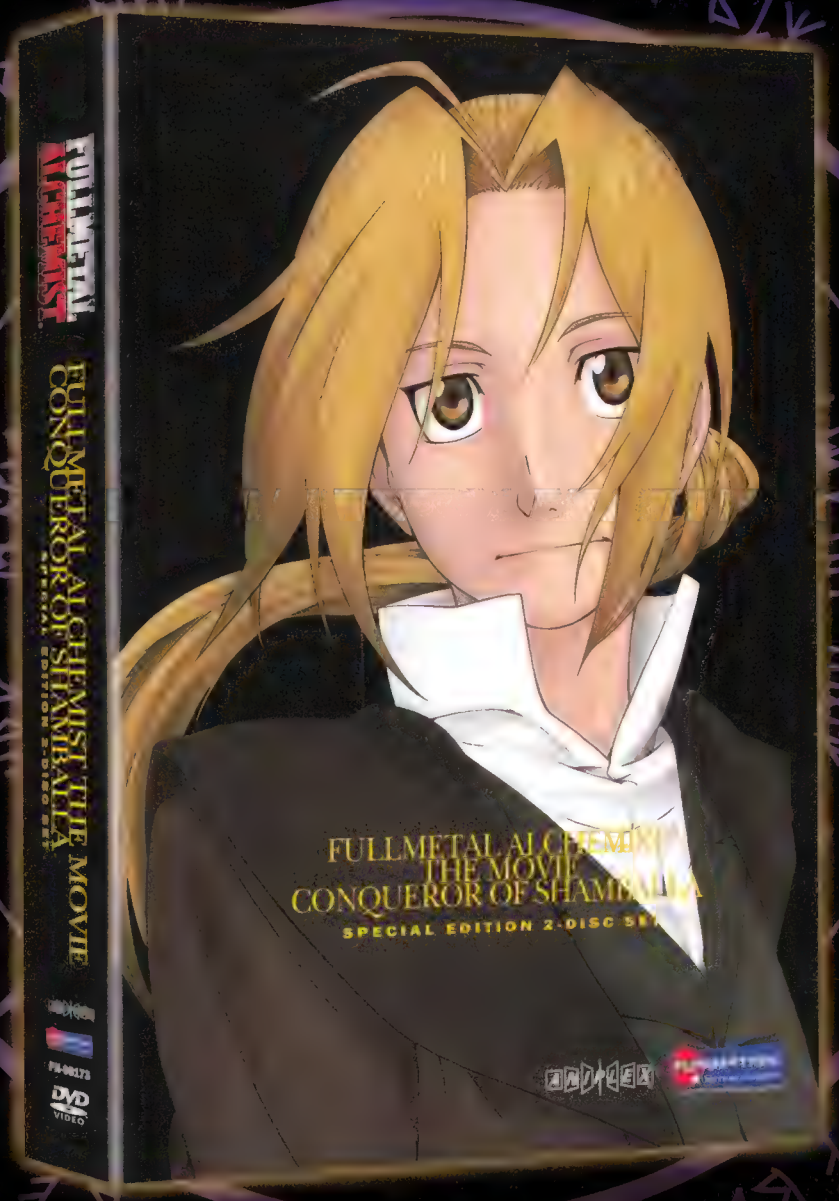
watch this



Afro Samurai

TV: Spike TV | **DVD:** FUNimation Productions | **Available:** Fall

Like the lovechild of Samurai Champloo and Soul Train, Afro Samurai—from the little known comic created by Japanese artist Takashi Okazaki—is soon to become the best thing to hit Spike TV since the butt of your remote, courtesy of Gonzo. Afro, the number-two sword fighter in the world, played by Samuel L. Jackson, is out for justice, literally, seeking revenge against the man he witnessed kill his father: Justice...the number-one sword fighter in the world. In other words, expect lots of the red stuff on this one. Limbs are sure to fly. RZA, who did the music for Kill Bill and Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai is whipping up a fusion of funk, hip-hop and rock for the BGM.



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play magazine

HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE

2006

words

Marvel™ Ani-Movie: The Animated Movie Maker

It works like this: First, select one of the four backgrounds to set the scene and place it on the base of the Ani-Movie Studio. Second, connect the unit to the television and pose an action figure or any object you would like to feature on the background. Capture the action with the built-in, adjustable digital camera. Next, move the object ever so slightly and capture that image with the camera as well. When you have finished shooting your scenes, press "play" and watch the fluid motion of your animated movie come to life on the small screen. It's that easy with Jazware's Marvel Heroes Ani-Movie Studio. The Ani-Movie is easy to use and loads of fun, especially if you've got a closet full of action figures. You can add sound effects, edit your creations, or save them to memory card to expand your stop-motion masterpieces. Play nice.
Available at Toys 'R Us 60.00

Look ma' no strings!

TAC Guitar Mania controllers

Freedom V Wireless Guitar Controller $54.99
The Cadillac of air guitars, the freedom V features AutoSense™ 2.4GHz Wireless (100 ft. range—800 hours of play on 4 AA batteries), FeatherTouch™ fret buttons for buttery control on the fast-action neck, Smart BiDirectional Accelerator™ for Star Power (a sensor that allows you to simply tilt-upwards on the controller to enter the Star Power bonus mode rather than having to play the controller while raising the guitar vertically), Patent Pending Button Cluster (flush start button to avoid accidental pausing), the Super Whammy System™ which incorporates a heavy gauge coil spring for extreme durability, Comfort Neck™ and the Cool Blue Backlit Rocking Rhythm™ Strum Bar tuned for a tighter feel and a more precise response. Flat out the sickest guitar controller on the planet.

Rocking V Wired Guitar Controller $39.99
All of the features of the Freedom V only wired and sans the cool backlit Strum Bar.

Shredder Guitar Controller $29.99
Nice guitar—small price: The closest thing to the licensed Guitar Hero guitar, the Shredder comes with a sticker sheet to personalize your axe, features smart switch positioning to avoid accidental pauses while you're going mental, and just looks and feels altogether nicer than the licensed model.

Available online at www.theguitarmania.com or at Fry's Electronics, Circuit City and other fine retailers.

Banshee 5.0 Desktop Speaker

The banshee desktop speaker is the first all-in-one, 5.0 surround sound listening station for your ipod, MP3 player, or PSP. Incorporating 5 surround sound speaker components into one compact cabinet the Banshee emits solid bass and ultra crisp highs. Once you play a PSP game therhered to this bit of tech you'll never look at those earbuds again. Comes with extra long chords and a cradle for your PSP movie viewing pleasure. Stay put and play it loud. 129.99 bansheeaudio.com

Joytech Nitro Racing Wheel for Xbox 360

With its high-intensity dual-vibration feedback, six-level user -electable steering sensitivity, integrated headset for Xbox Live, four wheel-mounted paddles and sequential stick, non-slip accelerator and brake, full-rubber wheel head, and glowing Xbox guide button the Nitro certainly has the goods, but how does it perform? Very well; in fact it might be the best wheel we've ever tested. Smooth precision feel and bells and whistles aside the Nitro uses suction cups over clamps making it more accessible and also comes with adjustable lap brackets. Pity it's not wireless, but for under a hundred bucks it's a lot of wheel. Serious PGR3 fans need apply. $89.99

Messiah - Generation Nex Videogame Console

The prettiest version of the NES/Famicom hardware seen to date, the Messiah features lots of little red LEDs to signify that various operations are functional and has the modular capability for using wireless controllers (sold separately), as well as existing peripherals like the Zapper light guns. There are two separate cartridge ports for both the Japanese Famicom games on top and for the US NES titles in the front and this is great for collectors of both.
The controllers feature fast response buttons so that you are never left in a bind and both turbo and slow-mo enhancements. The turbo works well enough, but the slow-mo is almost useless unless you don't mind getting a headache in the heat of battle while the unit alternates normal and pause mode to create this function. The placement of these feature functions is also a little strange as the turbo and slow-mo are placed where the traditional Select and Start buttons are and those are in turn placed above the A and B buttons. Two shoulder buttons have also been added but merely double for the A & B functions. Once you get used to this arrangement, everything is okay for play. The Messiah – Generation NEX played everything we plugged into it like a champ; if it's on your holiday buying radar, proceed full steam ahead.
This just in!
Messiah is introducing a brand-new controller for the NEX that will be out this holiday called the Generation NEX Wireless Arcade Stick. That's right, a WIRELESS ARCADE STICK for classic gaming!
For pricing and availability go to www.playmessiah.com

Retro gaming doesn't get any better than this. Everything you see here works as good as it looks.

HOLIDAY GIFT GUI

MicroOptical myvu personal media player

The myvu personal media viewer is compatible with the 30GB, 60GB and new 80GB video iPods and is the perfect solution for viewing movies purchased from the new iTunes 7. The myvu comprises lightweight eyewear with built-in video viewing and audio systems, an ultra-thin battery pack for six hours of viewing time, and a small pendant that offers easy access to all controls. Resembling a pair of thin, dark sunglasses, the viewing experience is comparable to a 27-inch screen from six feet away. Inside the front of the unit is MicroOptical's patented display system, adapted from hardware developed for the military to allow tank drivers and others to simultaneously view both information *and* surroundings.

Unlike an immersive headset system that blocks the user from seeing anything but the screen and, therefore, significantly limits its usefulness, myvu offers users "situational awareness." Through the use of a thin optical bridge, users can see over and under the screen while continuing to be aware of their surroundings. Complete with a premium travel case with room for your iPod as well as AC and car adapters for charging, the myvu system provides iPod lovers an unsurpassed personal experience in portable video watching. $399

The myvu personal media viewer, universal edition, can be used with virtually any media device with a video-out port. $299.99

www.myvu.com

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MSRP, $119.99; Available bundled with Audio Gateway for $199.99

Nyko Intercooler 360

Feeling a little paranoid during those all night play sessions? Snap on Nyko's Intercooler 360 and chase your troubles away. The Intercooler increases airflow and reduces heat throughout the 360's innards for improved protection of the internal circuitry, providing extended system life and reliability: No AC Adaptor required. We could do without the massive logo running down the side, but you should always wear protection. 19.95

Qmotion-XBoard

The XBoard connects to your PC, PS2 or Xbox and is compatible with all the best boarding games, like SSX, Amped and the Tony Hawk series, and allows players to control the game by measuring weight shift and foot movement through the board-shaped platform for an "enhanced gaming experience that simultaneously promotes physical fitness". Enhanced maybe…physical fitness—if you get winded doing this, see a doctor. No doubt the XBoard delivers as promised but it's not without a learning curve, and, well, some people look better holding a controller. $100.00 www.qmotions.com

PSP Speaker Fly Surround Sound Speakers

Make your PSP look like a winged spy cam and add killer audio at the same time with PDP's Headbanger Audio PSP Speaker Fly Surround Sound Speakers. Speakers rotate for easy storage, it's great for watching movies, and the sound is surprisingly good – easily the best mobile speaker solution for the PSP. Available at GameStop. 79.99

VG Pocket

VG Pockets are [illegible] and [illegible] play loads of classic games, and look and function great. We play-tested all four and they deliver as advertised.

Caplet Play loads of classic 16-bit games on the Caplet's 2.5" TFT LCD 640x240 backlit display or plug-and-play on your TV. The Caplet system is pre-loaded with 35 updated classics, including Burger Time, Space Invaders, Bust-A-Move, Bubble Blaster, BoxBoy, Yummy and Tasty, Adventures of Waldog, Deep Storm, Hanoi Tower, Bubble Wubble, Final Escape, Leapfrog, Wolfy's Quest, Craig the Caterpillar, Win or Lose, Legendary Hero, Crystal Cavern, Kart Racer X, Final Round Tennis, Magic Jelly Battle, Blocks II, Blaze Busters, Rotating Puzzle, Switch and Mix, Underwater Pinball, Sudoku Quiz, Survival Challenge, Greedy Grabber, Puzzle Chance, Go Back Home, Victory Road, Jet Racing, Motojet Mania, Code Name: Plumber, and Pop Goes the Ball. $39.99

Tablet The Tablet features a 2" TFT LCD 640x240 backlit display and plays 25 preloaded 8-bit classics including Frogger, Mutant Hunt, Off Roader, Risk it, Sudoku Quiz, Funny Fung, Lord of the Jewels, Leaper the Frog, Stellar Attack, Battle Blocks, Construction Jack, Memory Matching, Track Star, River Quest, Star Alley, Motocross Racer, Pinball Labyrinth, Billiards Master, Vitamania, Mr. Onion, Delivery Express, Birds of Prey, Whack the Critter, Survival Challenge, Stuntman Daredevil, and Delta Fighter. $29.99

Carrying cases and AV cables for TV play are sold separately. Two Disney versions are also available: Game iT! Princess Pals and Game iT! Classic Pals each featuring a 16-bit processor and 12 fu- filled kid-tastic Disney games.

Kart Wireless Controller

[illegible]

Cars

Wow, real tough call here, gee, let's see…is Disney/Pixar's Cars a worthy DVD? Will a triple whopper with cheese stop your heart? Heck yeah it is. How can anyone not love a passel of talking cars representing every facet of life, from middle-aged ladies bearing youth's over-the-crack tattoos to hayseeds that have yet to discover FM radio? And then there's the message, that it's not whether or not you win the race but how you make an audience ooh and ahh their way from the theatre to the fast food place, to the super market, to the toy store until their entire existence has been consumed by Lightning, Sally, Mater, and the rest of Radiator Springs. But enough about my collection. This is one fantastic movie, and the DVD is packed with a fair amount of extras (under the assumption that the making-of fun will be released at a later date closer to Cars 2 to further fatten the massive gross) including the all-new animated short: Mater and the Ghostlight, the Academy Award-nominated short: One Man Band, John Lasseter's inspiration for Cars, deleted scenes, and the requisite teasers. **DH**

Monster House

I played the Monster House game before I saw the movie so I thought that the bulk of the movie would take place inside the house where a gaggle of pipes, boilers, lamps, and appliances would coalesce to create a kind of Resident Evil Home Depot. But DJ, Chowder, and Jenny don't actually approach the house until we're looking at our watches. All the more reason to be awed at how captivated I was by the motion capture, with all of its stunning detail, and how willing Zemeckis and Spielberg were to cross the line from prepubescent schlock to actual macabre territory. Kids aren't as squeamish as the bulk of movies made to keep them still for two hours would have us believe. Jason Lee is great as Bones, John Heder the perfect Skull (hey, I know that guy!) Steve Buscemi plays a great grumpy old man (I used to do skids on that guys front lawn) and is it just me or is the fact that Kathleen Turner was perfectly cast as a man-eating house a bit sad? Peggy Sue got scary! Three featurettes in the house. **DH**

X-Men: The Last Stand

Third time could use some charm, but this potentially final version of the X-Men franchise packs a marginally entertaining punch. The first two films played more on character and set-up, drawing us into a cloud of isolation, discrimination and hatred. While the same themes carry over into *The Last Stand*, the impact is lost as the script hurls into a special effects party with throngs of X-men ripping every thing on screen apart. I have to say, I enjoyed the break from the emphasis on the limp relationship building of the previous films, but one loud action sequence too many brings the film down in its climax. Better served for casual fans than freaks of the comic-book—plenty of sloppy liberties are taken with the source material this time out—*X-Men: The Last Stand* is just another summer blockbuster series yearning to be more than it can possibly deliver.

The DaVinci Code

The Davinci Code is a bloated, unconvincing, melodramatic account of… well, not much, really, other than two talented yet miscast actors running from the law as they search for the Holy Grail. There's lots of talk of symbols and Christ and Mary and the veiled transgressions of the Catholic Church, but little talk of anything with much meaning or weight to drive the potential intrigue of the story. The movie softens its convoluted fact with glossy fiction, which would play well enough if both had more meat on their collective bones. In all its style and big-budget noise, *The Davinci Code* does begin to pick up steam toward the end, drawing us into its web of mystery, but you're ultimately left with a feeling that the book carried more charge. **BF**

BACK OF THE BOOK

EXECUTIVE EDITOR

The talk of the town...

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